GUARDIANS OF THE RANGE

J. E. GRINSTEAD

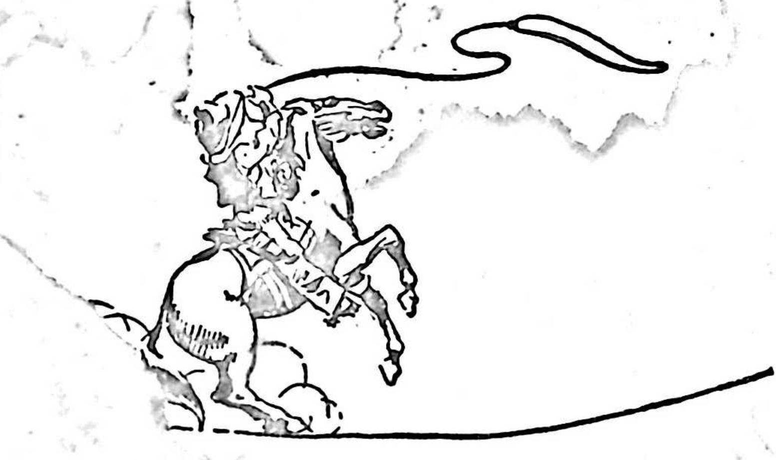
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Adventure in the West

J. E. GRINSTEAD, master story-teller of the romantic West, is at his best in this fast-moving tale of the borderland in the throes of violent strife. Verne knows that something mysterious is afoot from the very moment he rides up from the desert and plumps right into tragedy before he can reach the cow town in the hills. But his adventures really begin in earnest when Fate throws him in with two other "saddle tramps." Before long guns roar and terror grips the range and into the midst of gunfire and death ride the three mounted tramps—who win their right to range glory as their brawn rights wrongs and their guns blast for justice.



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J. E. GRINSTEAD



WILD WEST CLUB

WILLIAM COLLINS, SONS AND CO., LTD.
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CHAPTER I

WAR SIGNS

PLODDING upward from the sun-baked wide stretches of white desert land that spread out like molten silver beneath the blazing sun, the leg-weary pinto carried his long gangling rider up a winding trail to the topmost mesa of the inviting green hills. He had been headed for them since daybreak. The big ball of the coppery sun was dropping into the west, and its slanting rays made rainbow tints on the distant white desert floor, far behind now, though its shimmer could still be glimpsed from the hilltop.

All day the tall stoop-shouldered rider had been toiling upward, taking it by degrees, for the trip across the desert—one that had been necessary, and at thought of which the tall rider frowned—had been a gruelling one. Time and again he had been forced to stop, and it had been only by the grace of luck that he had been able to reach the green of the hill-tops that was his Mecca.

There was a breeze up here, cool, refreshing, after the blazing inferno of the desert and the long, gradual climb into the hills. On a mesa that was like a green-carpeted island looking out on a wide spread of rangeland, and with the white of the desert merely a reminder of the death that lay in its chalky ovens, the long-legged rider swung down from his tired pinto and stretched luxuriously. He unloosened the cinches of his saddle, took it off and gave his weary mount an opportunity to graze and cool his sweat-streaked back while he cropped the grass.

"Better make it good, old hoss," he murmured. "No tellin' when you'll get such another good chance. Just enough dinero left for one good feed for you at a livery stable—when we find one. Maybe some ham and eggs for me, and then——"

That was something the lanky rider did not like to think about. One good feed and then—— Well, it meant that he would have to stop his wanderings right here, and get a job somehow, or there wouldn't be any more eating for horse or man for a while. It had been his hope, too, that he would

be able to get some farther away than this, but that poker game in the cantino on the other side of the desert had done no good to his slender bank-roll. Right now, it just about wasn't.

The tall man had been wondering about this country ever since he had spied its green, from far down below, and had headed for it. What kind of place was it? He tightened his belt and sat down on the grass, with his back to a boulder to study it.

Right nice kind of cattle country, looked like. Pretty sweet grass on the side away from the desert and towards that little 'dobe town he could just see in the distance.

From his feet the series of small hills reached down to the line of a river, a silver-green river, probably, but glinting red now in the last rays of the sun. Sort of like a river of blood. The tall man shivered a little, and could not understand it. This was fair green land he was looking at, but somehow there was something about it that depressed him, that told him instinctively that these broad green ranges were trouble land.

And that should not be. Rarely had he looked on a land of more promise, of more beauty as seen through the eyes of a cattleman. The river was right in the centre of a valley that was a majestic watercourse, lush with grass and with willows and cottonwoods fringing the stream. A valley of beauty. But to the rangy rider who studied it, still, it somehow gave the impression of being a valley of mystery, perhaps of death—as if it were haunted by the greed of man that so often gripped Nature's most beautiful efforts out there in the land where men strove for supremacy, with dreams of empire.

Far down the valley, which stretched on both sides of the sparkling river until gathered up into the foothills of low mountains beyond, the range lay in the shimmering rays of the setting sun like a huge emerald in a setting of tall, frowning hills, escarpments, and peaks that shot towards the blue of the sky. Those mountains in the distance were like some stage setting, a backdrop maybe, with the dots of white that were the town beyond picked out against the dark green.

The tall man lolling against the stone on the mesa couldn't remember when he had seen a place of greater beauty, one that soothed him because he had been so long gone from such restfulness. At the same time, though, it gave him a restless feeling of something wrong that he could not understand—and certainly it could not be inspired by the scene of peace.

"Reckon I'll find out all about this place right soon," he muttered, as he felt in his vest pocket for the flat bag of makings that would afford him only a smoke or two more. He looked at it ruefully as he sparingly spilled tobacco flakes into the brown paper and rolled his quirly. "Reckon I'll high-tail for that town soon as pinto gets rested and filled up on grass. Reckon I got to get me a job—stomach's gettin' too plumb well acquainted with my backbone."

Under the soothing influence of the peaceful scene and with the gentle breeze touching his brow, the gangling rider dozed. The sun went down, the stars came out, pinpointing the blue canopy over him.

He did not know how long he slept, when pinto's nosing him woke him with a start. For a moment he looked around in bewilderment, not knowing where he was. Then the lights in the town at the foot of those distant hills reminded him afresh of the emptiness of his stomach. Hastily he arose, flung his saddle on the rested pinto and tightened the cinch.

It was pitch dark when he swung into saddle again and started down from the mesa on the trail that led through the rangeland towards the town. Guiding his way by the stars, he rode down into the wooded bottom lands, into the valley, and there in a little clearing beside the trail he came upon a story that is old in the West, but one ever-recurring.

It was the story of greed, of one man wanting what belonged to another. A story which confirmed the tall man's subconscious feeling that here in this land of loveliness there was something mightily wrong—and that death stalked the green valley.

The strange rider first saw the horse that stood not far from the trail, but there was something in its strained position that should not be there. Riding closer, the man in the darkness saw that the big cow pony was braced against a rope that held a calf that had been tied down. The calf was too exhausted to make more than panting sounds, all its power for bawling long since gone. And beside the hog-tied calf was something that told the rider from the desert the whole sordid story.

There lay the ashes of a dead fire, with a running iron still thrust into the cold embers. And to one side of the ashes, as if he had been caught in the very act of rising after reaching out for the iron lay the body of a man. Even in the dim starlight the rider who had come upon the scene of death could see the dark hole in the very centre of the man's forehead,

between the dead eyes that stared sightlessly upward at the midnight-black sky.

"Gawd!" muttered the tall rider as he swung quickly from saddle, casting a quick look around. But there was no one in sight; no sound to break the peaceful night stillness.

This was not the first time the gangling rider had seen sights like this, born to this land where men fought over land and water, over cattle, over the rights of one man over another. But to come upon it unexpectedly like this—a stranger in a strange land . . .

Cold shivers ran up and down the spine of the discoverer as he walked across the grass towards the body on the ground. His brow was furrowed, his eyes black as he approached. So he had been right. Things were not as they seemed in this land.

But this much was plain. He knew sign when he saw it, and here was a man who had been caught by somebody in the very act of branding a calf that did not belong to him. Caught—and left like this for the very setting to tell its story to whoever found the body.

Who had done it. . . . That did not concern the man who had come so unexpectedly on the death scene. It was no business of his to report this or to take any action. In fact, his only safety lay in saying nothing about it at all. He was a stranger, and sometimes men's tempers were hot. He might not be believed if he told the truth about what he had found.

If such things were going on around here, there would be little question that hired gunmen had been brought in to help with the range war—if there *was* one. Why would not he be suspected of being one, perhaps hanged to the highest tree before he could prove his innocence of this killing? If he *could* prove it!

That was the trouble—and the question. How could he say where he had come from, what he was doing there? To have any questions asked, any inquiries made, might be just as desperate a situation for the tall rider who had come across the desert as to be thought a new-comer hired gunman.

Wearily the tall man turned from consideration of the dead man. It was his cue to get away from this spot—and to get away quick. Whoever had done this thing might be coming back, maybe bringing men for witnesses. It wouldn't be hard for a man to trump up some reason for getting men out at night, and then "accidentally" stumbling on this.

But there was at least one thing he must do first. The tall rider had never been able to stand the suffering of animals. That calf had to be turned loose, and the horse must be freed. It would find its way home. A wave of genuine regard swept the man for the courage and patience of horses like this, trained to do their duty. They would stand for hours, as this cow pony had, until it was released.

Firmly turning away from the dead man and his staring eyes, the rangy rider walked over to the calf and with his jack-knife cut the hogging strings. Not, however, until he had struck a match and examined the brand that had been made by the running iron in the ashes.

There were the fresh marks of a brand—Circle H G—plainly marked on the young animal's side but faintly beneath it he could see where another brand had been. His lips tightened. It was as he had thought. Brand running—in the darkness.

The calf got groggily to its trembling legs, staggered a moment, then tail up, and bawling weakly, headed for the wooded land surrounding the little clearing. The tall man watched it a moment, until it was out of sight, then turned his attention to the fagged, gaunt cow pony.

His hands were just feeling along the horse's rump and sides for a brand when suddenly he became aware, subconsciously, with that sixth sense so often found in men of the open when they are alone, that he was being watched. He could feel eyes on him from somewhere in the brush behind him as plainly as though he could see them! Who was it—and what did they intend to do?

For a moment, his hand jerked a little, as though he meant to go for his holstered gun, then it stopped before the movement was more than in his own mind. Going for his gun, if he were being watched from ambush, was equivalent to committing suicide. He could be cut down before he ever found out just where a foe lay.

He would have to try strategy. But one thing was certain—he was getting away from this spot, the minute he could, whether he was right or wrong about being watched. He threw the reins over the cow pony's neck and gave the animal a smart slap on the rump.

"Get along with you," he said sharply. "Go on home. You've earned a good feed, and Lord knows you ain't responsible for what's gone on here."

He was thinking quickly that it might have done him some good if he had been able to find that pony's brand before he turned him loose. Caution, though, said there was no time for that now.

Slowly he swivelled around, his eyes boring through the darkness into all the surrounding scrub and trees. And his instinct had been right! In the dimness he saw the glint of starlight on the muzzle of a steadily held six-gun. But he gave no indication of that as he moved slowly over and gazed down again at the dead man. As slowly he shook his head.

"Plumb bad," he said aloud, as though to himself. "Runnin' into a killin' when you don't know nothin' about it, or who it is, or how comes. And when you try to do the right thing by some poor dumb animals you get plumb neck deep into a welter of woe . . . Now I wonder what all these shenanigans are about, anyhow?"

If he had thought that would bring an answer, he was mistaken. There was no sound, no movement from the scrub, but the starlight still glinted on that gun. Now, at a spot a little removed, he could see the bore of another gun through the blackness of the leaves. He was in for it—and no mistake!

He spoke again, in a level voice, and as though he had nothing to fear.

"Come on out, hombres," he said matter-of-factly. "And let's talk this here thing over. Maybe you can tell me the right of it. Maybe you don't want no pilgrims fussin' around here. If that's so, all you got to do is to say the word, and I'll hightail—pronto! And I ain't seen or heard a thing!"

His answer to that came more promptly than he had expected. A bearded man burst into the clearing, his gun held unwaveringly, on his face a heavy frown as he bit out raspingly:

"Reach high, feller! We got you dead to rights—caught red-handed!"

The tall man's hands went up promptly as from the scrub stepped another man, younger, huskier to burliness, but with eyes that were deadly with menace and threat. His gun, too, glinted, and from one arm dangled a looped rope.

"So you wasn't satisfied, huh?" he snarled. "What you have to come back here for, anyway? You should have

been satisfied. Got Randy, didn't you? Or are you one of them killers that likes to gloat over what he's done?"

"I ain't never been here before, hombres—I'm givin' you my word," the tall man protested earnestly. "I was just a-ridin' by and I saw . . ."

"Shut up, bushwhacker!" snarled the bearded man in front. "Think you're tough, huh? Well, we'll show you, you coyote killer! You'll shore be sorry you ever hired out your guns to *one* man on this range!"

"Fork your pony, hired killer!" snapped the younger man with the lasso. "You're going for a ride—a short one—to that cottonwood over there that's a plumb good hang-tree."

"Hey, hold on!" the tall man exclaimed urgently. These men meant business. He wasn't going to get a chance, it looked like. "Listen, fellers! I'm tellin' you—I didn't do this—I didn't know nothin' about . . . Why, I don't even know who this dead hombre is. I just——"

"Likely story," growled the younger cowman. "Maybe you think we're loco—can't see through a knothole. Well, it's no go. It's plain enough what's happened here. You're drawing blood pay from that old devil that hates us, and you come out here and branded this calf the way you done, then killed Randy—likely brought him along prisoner just for that—and fixed it up all hunky-dory so's your old man and his killin' outfit would make it look like Randy was brandin' one of his calves, and they'd have the right they been lookin' for to come over and raise bloody hell with our outfit!"

"But I tell you——" the stoop-shouldered man shouted desperately. This was all Greek to him, but it looked as if it was his finish, anyway, innocent or not. These men did not intend to be argued with.

"Shut up!" repeated the bearded man. "Ready with that lass rope, Spike? . . . Fork your horse, killer, I said!"

The tall fellow's mind was working swiftly as he took one step towards his horse, lifted the trailing reins, and laid them over the animal's neck. If he could get just one ghost of a chance. . . . He had to get away! Lord he knew he had done plenty in his time, but that was no reason for going out for something he hadn't done at all. Just a little chance . . .

He heard the sing of the lasso as it sped for his head, thrown with a master hand. But in that moment of pregnant silence the lanky rider surprised his captors. They could not

see just what it was he did, but at the very instant the rope should have settled about his shoulders, he had made a cat-like move. Instead of the rope settling, it was in his hand, caught just beyond the noose.

In the same move he gave it a swift jerk. Taken unaware, the lasso thrower was yanked forward, stumbling to his knees, as his bearded companion let out a yell at the unexpectedness of it. The bearded man's gun roared, but with the same movement he had thrown his younger antagonist, the tall man had whirled with the speed of light, his own gun yanked from his holster.

There was no time to fire, but he was swinging the gun as he leaped forward. The barrel came in smashing contact with the forehead of the bearded man as he barged forward. He shot to the ground like a pole-axed steer, without a sound, his gun again roaring from the reflex action of his trigger finger. But all it did was to startle the tall man's pinto, though the horse trained to obedience only trembled with fright and did not move.

Before the stranger could leap to his horse's back, though—the one chance for which he was looking, since the other men's horses were hidden somewhere back in the brush—the younger assailant he had unexpectedly thrown was up and lunging towards him. The fellow's gun had been flung from his hand by his stumble and in the dark he could not see it. He was on the tall man, though, before the man accused of bushwhacking could again fire.

The stoop-shouldered rider saw a huge fist slash at his chin, then they were at it, man to man. The tall stoop-shouldered man tried again to swing his Colt as he avoided the oncoming blow with a swift roll of his head. But it only landed on his antagonist's shoulder, bringing a howl of rage and pain.

The burly man flung up his hands involuntarily, but they came down at once, coming for the tall fellow drawn up like talons—hands that would crush the life out of him if once they reached his throat. Devilish hands, they looked like—hands that would grip and grind a man's throat while their owner howled in glee.

Once more the tall stranger sought to bring up his gun as he side-stepped, but it was useless. The heavy man was on him, fists slashing as he came on. One blow knocked the gun aside, as his bunched knuckles headed for the tall man's

jaw. But at the same instant, the rangy stranger's own fist smashed hard on to his stocky foe's nose. He felt the hot stickiness of blood as the doubled fist came away. The fellow let out a bull's roar of rage.

"I'll kill you for that!" he mouthed, with a curse, beside himself with fury.

Both fists were swinging for the tall man's head the next instant. But ducking and weaving, his lanky target was not there. He had taken just one step aside, and the next instant his string-bean body was boring in with all he had, as one fist started from the ground, gathering speed and death as it swung upward.

That punch connected firmly with the stocky man's jaw, and he, too, went down, then without a sound except the dull thud of his huge body against the ground.

Rubbing his aching fists, for one instant the tall rider from beyond the desert looked down at the men he had vanquished without gun work. He was thankful for that. Killing was something he had no stomach for. Particularly killing men he did not even know, no matter if they had elected him for a necktie party.

They were both out, staring up at the sky with eyes as sightless as those of the dead man beyond them. They would not come to for some time. Even so, both of them were but vague blurs in the darkness. The tall man was not certain that he would know either of them again if he should see them in the daylight, unless it was from their general build.

He was thankful for that. For of course it meant that they would not be likely to know him if they saw him again. There were plenty of tall men on the ranges, and . . .

He had to get away—quickly. He had wished for a chance, and now he had it. Caution, for a moment, urged that he put as wide a grace between himself and this place, where it certainly looked as if a range war was either in progress or was imminent, as he could. On second thought he set his lips grimly.

"Damned if I will," he muttered between his teeth. "Looks like I'd been dealt a hand in some kind of game that might be kinda interesting—and I'm not going to hightail till I know why I almost decorated a hang-tree, anyhow."

Deliberately he got to his horse and rode away, leaving the two unconscious men and one dead man on the grass of the clearing. There was little likelihood that it would be possible

for him to be followed by his trail, for the clearing was grassy where hoof-marks would not show. Also he had been travelling on grass for some distance before he had reached the gruesome clearing—as he was now.

He was some distance away before he struck a marked trail at all. Then he drew rein and considered. He could still see the lights of the town ahead—the town for which he had intended heading. But he shook his head.

"Not to-night," he decided. "Might look kinda funny, me meanderin' into that town this time of night—when it comes out what's happened out here." He sighed deeply and spoke to his horse. "Well, no oats to-night, Pinto. And no ham and eggs for yours truly. Reckon I'll just have to take in another notch in my belt—if there's any room for another one. You'll have to fill up on grass, again, seem like."

Sleeping under the stars was no novelty, and the tall man had had visions of curling up in the hay in the barn of some friendly liveryman. But not under the circumstances. Discretion was again the better part.

Winding his way upward, he found another mesa where a trickling little rill came from a high spring. Watering his mount, unsaddling and tethering him, he once more curled up with his saddle for a pillow and the stars for his canopy. In moments he was sleeping the sleep of a man whose conscience is clear—but whose stomach is not so happy.

CHAPTER II

Horcado

So it was that for all through the hours of darkness, while night had folded her black mantle over the lush valley, while the moon had come up unknown to him and smiled benignly down, the tall rider who had so miraculously escaped death slept dreamlessly and soundlessly. But over all the valley and over the town hovered more than darkness. It was the very evil spirit of darkness that hovered there, closing in ever tighter, the spirit that goads men to deeds of violence, urged on by vengeance or greed, sponsored by avarice.

The valley was rich and men coveted it. They coveted it to the point that intrigue and violence were even then mar-

shalling their forces to turn the green spots where Nature had laid a lavish hand into a dark and bloody ground.

The sun was well up when the tall man awoke. He grimaced as his eyes lit on the surrounding land where there was no sign of breakfast unless he had been content to dine on bark and green leaves. Not even berries were to be seen, for it was not the season for berries.

Longingly he looked towards the town that lay like a cluster of white gems in a padding of green under the morning sunlight. From this distance the town looked clean and white and pure as the river that flowed near it, but the tall man knew cow towns. He was well aware that on closer view it would show its sordidness, and that what from this distance looked like white adobe buildings, clean as the driven sonw would, on closer appraisal, be muddied and dirty, and that dingy false-fronted buildings of clapboard would line the dusty main street. They were all alike, the cow-towns, he mused; as alike as peas in a pod. The only difference was in the variety of devilment that dogged each place—and from what he had already seen he was aware that this town in the foothills was probably no different from the rest. Idly he wondered what its name was. Well, he would soon find out.

Safe enough to amble on down there now. If there was to be any furore about what had happened during the night, it would be about over by now, anyway, and a lone saddle tramp wandering in, looking for a job, would be under no particular suspicion—if any. Anyway, he *had* to eat—and that was worth taking any chance for, the way his stomach felt.

Straightening his disarrayed clothing as best he could, he went over to the rill and washed thoroughly, glad to get the last of the desert dust from himself. He drank deeply, then watered his horse.

The sun was already high when he got into saddle and began his long meander down the slopes towards the town—and ham and eggs. He was sparing with his last shreds of tobacco, for the quirly he smoked as he rode along was the last but one before the bag would be empty. The tag that hung ouside the pocket of his flannel shirt was more for show than for anything else.

Once more, as he rode along, his spirits expanded as he took in the beauties of the rangeland to which chance had brought him. The cottonwoods and alders whispered in the

slight breeze, their dewy leaves showing silver in the first sun of morning. The rangeland rolled away in waving green of high grass, much like the swells of a placid sea.

The river was silver, not red, in the morning light, as it hurried through the valley to be lost in the maze of mountains on the other side of the slope where it would join others beyond the buttes. The peaks that rose high towards the blue sky were touched with purple and rose and gold, glistening in rainbow hues, with their heads held martially like rows of proud giant soldiers marching along to join the great army of the Rockies far beyond them.

Birds sang from the copses, and quail chirred from the underbrush as they sped away with a whirring fluttering of wings at the approach of the horseman. The breeze that fluttered the high grass was sweet and cool, touched with the warmth that presaged a hot day ahead but which not as yet had arrived. Through the crystal air the white town seemed to beckon, to offer a welcome.

A sweet land. A land to fight for and hold. A land that was too fair, though, to be baptized with the blood of angry, striving men. The tall man shook his head as his keen grey eyes took it all in.

"I don't know, though," he muttered. "I don't know. Seems as if hell might be getting ready to bust here—like it's done in many another place."

Not once did he think, however, of turning his horse's head in another direction. He had put his hand to the plough last night, and he did not mean to turn back. Whatever was here, he was already a part of it, and instinct told him that somehow—he could not guess how that would come about—he had made only a beginning. Whether it was merely range war he would face here, or out and out banditry which was the scourge of so many a community, rustling that took the life blood of such communities, he meant to see it through.

First, though, it was necessary to learn the lay of the land, and of course he would be able to pick up some information in that cow-town. He would learn its name, too, just as soon as he saw the sign on the first general store, or hotel. There was certain to be some kind of one. Cowmen wouldn't know what to do without their hotels, in cow-towns when they couldn't make it home—which happened many a time.

It was past the middle of the morning when the tall rider who had come from beyond the desert guided his pinto down

the main street of the town and saw from the livery stable sign that he had reached the town of "Horcado." It was there before him as it was on the swinging sign of the hotel farther down the dusty street:

HORCADO PALACE HOTEL

Accommodations for Man and Beast

One Dollar a Day, Pay When You Get It.

The rangy rider drew rein before the livery stable. Pinto came first. He had waited a long time—a good old horse.

"A good feed of oats," the man said, as he pulled a silver dollar from his pocket. "A rub-down and curry—and I'll be after him right soon. Where's the best place for a hombre to feed?"

"There's the hotel," said the liveryman dubiously, after he had taken one glance at the man who had made the inquiry. "But I reckon you could get fixed up all right at the Chink's Busy Bee. It ain't so bad there."

"Thanks," drawled the rangy rider, as he moved away, with a chuckle in his throat. To himself he was saying: "Wonder if I got a placard on me that says this is the last of my dinero."

He was feeling more himself as he finished eating and left the Busy Bee. Ham and eggs were a great institution. There ought to be more of them. Maybe it was up to him to see there was—and beefsteak, too. Good waddies could eat their fill of cow, and he'd always kind of fancied himself as a top hand. Now if he could get a little information, could pick up a hint or two, and maybe find out where somebody was wanting a good cow nurse. . . . .

He stopped in front of the King Pin Saloon, gazing a little longingly at the swing doors, and fingering the lone fifty-cent piece in his jeans. Well, it might be worth it.

Suddely he made up his mind and, ignoring the line of men who were tilted back in chairs on the hotel porch and the porch of the general store, he marched for the swing doors. But he was aware that those men had been eyeing him with a

little hint of uneasiness in eyes from beneath the brims of pulled down Stetsons, and that they had not missed the fact that he was wearing his Colt in a tied-down holster.

From the very furtiveness of their looks he was aware that there was an undercurrent of uneasiness in the town and that any new-comer was eyed with suspicion, until his business became known. But the tall man was also aware—and he chuckled at the thought—that every man who had surveyed him had been certain that he was no gunman, and that, as belligerent as the tied-down gun looked, that it was probably for protection only.

For the tall man who strode into the bar was aware that his very appearance was his best alibi to being no gunman, a deceptive appearance that for long had been his best armour.

The bartender looked up disinterestedly as the stranger strode into the bar-room and lined up against the bar—the only morning customer.

"What's your preference pilgrim?" he asked, without bothering with any other greeting.

"Whatever comes to hand," the tall man said, with an equal show of carelessness as he hung a heel over the rail and tossed down the silver half dollar on the bar mahogany.

He took his time taking the drink, instead of downing it at a gulp as was the more ordinary procedure for one wanting a drink so early in the day. There was no other customer in the place, and he looked about in a little surprise.

"Nobody wantin' a little o' the hair of the dog that bit 'em," he inquired genially.

The bartender scowled. "Reckon they're all out buryin' last night's kilt," he offered gruffly. "Maybe they'll all be trailin' in after they're through up at Boot Hill. Kinda more'n an ordinary night last night."

The tall man nodded, with a quirk to his humorous lips. "I savvy," he said. "Tough town, huh?"

"Maybe not so much," the bartender said carelessly. "Ain't more'n two killin's any night. Except on special occasions."

"Uh-huh." The tall visitor nodded and took another sip of his drink.

The bartender scowled. Tenderfoot, huh? Sipping his liquor like that. Taking an almighty time to do it, too.

Several times the tall man made a tentative effort to draw the man behind the bar into conversation, but the fellow was

tight-lipped. Or else he was resentful of this stranger who took such a long time over one drink and made no move towards buying another. At last the tall man moved away from the bar towards a chair at a table in the corner.

"Reckon I might as well wait here," he remarked. "Got to see somebody."

"'Nother drink?" asked the barkeep hopefully, but his customer shook his head.

"Nope. Reckon not. Kinda doctor's orders, as you might say, not to swaller too much 'fore dinner-time."

The bartender did not answer.

"Huh!" he was thinking. "I can well believe that. Lunger, sure as Gawd made horned toads. Now what the hell's he doin' around here? Never, heard this climate was good for 'em."

He went on about his business and the tall man dropped into a chair at the table. The man at the bar made no attempt at any further conversation, but his taciturnity appeared not to discourage the lanky one-drink man. He sat there with his head slumped on his chest.

The barkeep could not know that he was only waiting. Maybe somebody would come in, and then he could pick up a hint or two that he wanted. Might as well be here as anywhere, at that. The last cent was gone, and where he went or where he stayed now, until something further happened, made no difference.

CHAPTER III

WELL MET

It was almost an hour before anybody came in at all, and by that time Val Thorpe, the bartender, had attended to every duty he could scrape up and stood behind the bar of the King Pin looking at his only customer with a little bewilderment, if not entirely distastefully.

He was not really a customer, at that, Thorpe was thinking, taken in the right sense of the word. He was not buying, and had not been since that one and only drink. But as Thorpe had continued to study the man with his head slumped on his chest, the fellow had become more interesting to him, if he was not a beautiful sight.

The fellow would have been a six-footer if it had not been for his badly stooped shoulder, which made his chest look flatter than it was. There was no tan on his face—a suspicious circumstance to Thorpe in itself—and beneath a broad Stetson it looked ghastly pale. He wore a pair of brand new batwing chaps, and a tied-down gun that seemed to be slightly in his way. In the hour that had passed, Val Thorpe had had more opportunity for observation than the men on the porches outside who had seen only that the gun *was* tied down.

The rest of the stoop-shouldered young man's get-up was not new, but it was strange to the cow country about Horcado, a sort of conglomerate mix-up of town and country, of range-land and dudishness. Beneath the batwing chaps he wore chocolate-coloured shoes and leather puttees—a long stride from the high-heeled boots that were favoured by the waddies and cowmen in the country around Horcado.

His shirt was of delicately striped silk, and his tie lavender, to match one of the stripes in the shirt. He looked as if a gambler and rodeo performer and a tenderfoot duke had been scrambled.

The more he studied the man in the corner, the more uncertain Val Thorpe was of this stranger's breed. But he took his astonished eyes off the curiosity as the morning's business showed a sign of picking up. Two men stepped through the batwing doors, men as strange to Thorpe as the queer-looking customer at the corner table, and approached the bar with loud laughter and talk and a jingling of muddied spurs.

These men were no curiosity to Val Thorpe, nor did they offer any enigma. He knew them for what they were—knew their particular breed—the minute he clapped eyes on them. They were strangers all right, but they were probably strangers in a score of places, or such places had known them only fleetingly. Saddle-drifter was written all over both of them.

"What'll it be, gents?" Val Thorpe asked courteously, giving a swab to the mahogany with the bar towel.

"Whisky straight—and make it the boss' stuff!" came a bass and tenor duet from the two promptly.

Listening to snatches of their conversation, the tall man in the corner quickly gathered that one of them was called Rile. He was a six-footer, lean and raw-boned, probably

made of whang leather and hogging strings. He had deep blue eyes and a deep bass voice. A rollicking, devil-may-care manner, too.

The other man, whom Rile called Concho as he kept up a running fire of conversation with his companion and the bartender, was almost a foot shorter than his partner, but with quick mannerisms that a bigger man could not emulate. He had black hair, black birdlike eyes that twinkled, and a whining tenor drawl to his voice.

They had finished two drinks, and talked for some little while before the man Rile asked a question that the man at the corner of the table wanted an answer to also, though as yet he had not wanted to ask it himself.

"Anybody in this part of the country got any cows that needs a nurse or two?" Rile boomed, pouring out his third drink.

Val Thorpe answered that question immediately. He had been expecting it. He knew the way of saddle tramps who drifted through the country, finding work wherever the fancy hit them.

"Yep," he said. "You've come to the right neck of the woods, hombres, if you're lookin' for work. If what you want is a job where you have to eat while you change mounts, and don't need no bed a-tall, I'm thinkin' a ranch owner named Obe Carter might take you on, at his O I C."

"Like that, huh?" growled Rile. "Well, we ain't been petted much, not so's you could notice it. I reckon we could stand it awhile . . . Whereabouts is this O I C outfit at?"

"Ten mile north of here," the bartender informed. "You can't miss it. Everything between the Twin Rivers belongs to old Obe Carter."

"We seen one river," put in Concho. "But it didn't look none like a twin."

"Didn't you ever hear of twins bein' separated?" asked Val Thorpe acidly. "These here rivers ain't no Siamese twins. You keep on lookin' far enough and you'll find another river the other side of the valley all right."

The partners tossed down their third drink and turned their backs to the bar to roll a smoke and let the drinks sink home. It was then that they noticed the other sole occupant of the place—the young man in the big Stetson who sat alone at the table in the corner.

"Come join us, pardner," Rile invited cheerfully, beginning to feel expansive towards the whole world.

The tall young man stood up, took two steps towards them eagerly, then stopped.

"Excuse me, fellers," he said embarrassedly, but Val Thorpe quickly noted that it was in perfectly good cow country language, in spite of his doubts. "I'm plumb broke—jest spent my last four bits—and I don't like to drink with hombres when I can't——"

"Oh, that's all right!" Rile laughed boomingly. "We'll be broke when we get out of here, and then we'll all be whittled down to the same size. Forget it. Come and join us."

Concho promptly joined his tenor voice to the urgent invitation. The stoop-shouldered young man came on a little hesitantly and lined up beside them at the bar.

"All right," he said. "Since you insist. It's right kind of you. Er-er-my name is Verne."

The tall, strapping Rile drew a long face. "I beg your pardon, sir," he boomed in his compelling bass. "I don't see how come I ever forgot the introductions when I asked you up here . . . So your name's Verne, huh? Any relation to Jules?"

"Yes," said the young pilgrim gravely. "Jules Verne was my brother. Black sheep of the family, Jules. Never could do nothing with him. We hardly ever speak of him at home. Right sad."

"Jules was an awful liar," said Rile, in a tone of sympathy. "But I can sure see it don't run in the family. My name is Rile, Verne, and my pardner goes by the handle of Concho. He is a Texas product, born on the head draws of the Rio Concho. He says that the reason he is so small is that it didn't rain in that country for seven years after he was born, and everything had a tough time sprouting. He also states that he didn't shed his milk teeth until he was twelve or thereabouts. Waiting all that time for milk, because if they have got a heap of cows down there, cows ain't no sign of milk in Texas."

"Thanks for such a splendid introduction," said the grey-eyed, boyish-looking young fellow with the flat chest and stooped shoulders. "Now maybe you'd like to know something about me. I just rolled in here this morning—escaped from a circus, with two elephants, a tiger and the bearded

lady, but had the misfortune to lose 'em in a coulee a ways back."

"Potent hooch in this here King Ben place," mused Concho, grinning as he looked up at the ceiling, with his tongue stuck out an angle in his cheek. He sighed. "Just two-three drinks gets Rile drunk, and now here's this other gent gets plumb soused on anticipation."

Rile laughed heartily and nodded at the bartender as he shoved a wad of bills across the mahogany bar.

"Here's the roll, pardner," he said to Val Thorpe. "Put it in the till, and when we drink it up, tell us to vamoose. We'll hightail pronto."

Thorpe laid the money on the back bar and went on with the service. He was content now. At least some profit was being shown on a dull morning, and this hombre with no chest to speak of would pay for his settin' room at any rate.

But as drink after drink was served, and the exchequer got lower, he could not help but marvel at the manner in which that obvious lunger was lapping up poison with these two seamy drifters. From the way he could put it down he might have been as salty as they were—and plainly he was not.

The three of them were getting along together all right, though, and that was something. He had no cause to complain. In half an hour they were singing "Old Paint" with their heads together in some gosh-awful harmonizing, but it made them happy. In an hour Rile was unexpectedly quoting Vergil, and that fellow Verne was going on with that circus stuff he had pulled, telling a marvellous tale about how he had roped a lion and a tiger at once when he had been head man of the abandoned circus.

It was Concho who finally broke up the party. He was partly sober, because it was Rile's turn to get drunk, and they had had an agreement about that little thing ever since they had started riding the river together.

"Time to break up the party," Concho said, in tones that would brook no denial. "When Rile turns professor, he's drunk all right—don't need no more, whether he's drunk up the whole bank-roll or not." He glanced at Verne, grinning. "And when ary gent on earth gets to lyin' like you're doin', Verne, and plumb believin' it hisself *he's* drunk. Let's ride for the O I C, see if we can grab us off a job with eats." He waved at the bartender. "Give us a road bottle, pardner. May be needin' it 'bout five miles out."

"Aw ri'." Rile gave in complacently, as he slid an arm about Verne companionably. "Come on, kid, and go with us. Three's company and two's a crowd this time. Concho, he's sober, and couldn't be company noways. Sober man couldn't be company. How could he?"

Verne agreed to that with a show of dignity, and as Concho slid the road bottle into his pocket, the three turned to the door. They were so interested in each other as they staggered out of the King Pin that they did not notice a scowling puncher who had just drifted into the place and who sauntered up to take the place they had vacated at the bar.

Val Thorpe was smiling as he watched the three men move out on to the plank sidewalk and stagger off in the general direction of the livery stable. They had been a welcome diversion in a boring hour of the morning. He was feeling slightly regretful because he had been a little short in his treatment of that lunger when he had first come in. Why hadn't the fellow said he was broke? That would have been all right with Val Thorpe—for a lunger. Fellow didn't have a heck of a time to live, and down booze.

He did not pay much attention to his new customer until the puncher rapped sharply on the bar. Then he turned to him.

"What's its name, Dave?" he asked, as the man hung a booted heel on the rail and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand.

"Whisky straight—you ought to know," snapped the cowboy who had been called Dave. He nodded his head towards the swing doors that were still swaying back and forth. "Who is them fellers that just went out of here?"

Val Thorpe shrugged. "Search me. Never seen 'em before in my whole endurin' life."

"I heard 'em say they was headin' for the O I C," growled Dave. "Gunnies?"

"You know as much as I do 'bout that" snapped the barkeep spiritedly. "They sure looked like saddle tramps to me—on the look for a job, and that's what I think they are."

"But they said——"

"Yeah. I heard what they said—about headin' for the O I C. Why not? They're lookin' for jobs. I told 'em old Obe wanted hands, and so——"

"Oh, you did, did you?" snapped Dave.

He glared at Val Thorpe an instant before he tossed down his drink. Then he laughed, a chortle that had in it no amusement.

"Well, Obe Carter does need hands, and he's goin' to need some real ones—not two saddle bum tramps and a lunger. Obe's been runnin' it over everything and everybody in this country, but he's goin' to stop, and you mark my words. Who's goin' to stop him? Well, who you think? Joe Peel's goin' to stop him—that's who. Joe Peel built up the old Double Springs Ranch until it's a real ranch. Joe'll make Obe behave himself on the east of the Twins. Obe always said the Double Springs outfit was a bunch of rustlers, and he's been tryin' right damn hard to prove it—with no luck. But he won't say that but once to Joe Peel."

Val Thorpe did not look at the puncher, but his voice had an acid tinge when he spoke.

"You workin' for Joe Peel now?" he asked, as he swept up bottle and dirty glass with one hand, and wiped the mahogany bar with the other.

You know damn well I ain't," snapped Dave. "What in hell makes you say a thing like that?"

Val Thorpe tossed down the bar rag and looked steadily into the eyes of the man across the bar from him.

"Well, see here, Dave Stoak," he accused, without mincing words, "old Obe Carter is straight as a die, and you know it! They don't come no better than him. He may be rough, and he may be a little free with the rope when he catches a rustler, as who wouldn't—but he's square. Now you listen here. If you ain't workin', Obe needs hands. He was in here tellin' me that, askin' me to send him anybody I saw wasn't tied up with some other outfit. Why don't you get a job with him?"

The puncher reached for his fresh glass and shrugged.

"I can't. He fired me last year, right in the middle of the round-up. Pass that bottle over here."

Dave Stoak poured his drink, tossed it down, and went out without another word to the bartender. Val Thorpe watched him cross to the general store and he, too, shrugged.

"Dave Stoak," he apostrophized the disappearing puncher, "I'll bet you a hundred dollars you're a danged liar. I'll bet you're workin' for Joe Peel this minute. You may not be punchin' his cows, or roundin' up strays, but you *are* hangin' around Horcado to see if Obe Carter gets

any new hands, how many, and how good—and if any of them look like they can sling a gun."

Val Thorpe nodded to himself as he took a vicious swipe with the bar towel at a few drops of liquor that Dave Stoak had spilled.

"Yeah, then I'll double the bet that if Joe Peel jumps old Obe Carter, which he's plumb honin' to do, he won't build up Double Springs no more, no time."

CHAPTER IV

The O I C Spread

BEFORE they had gone three miles, the newly met pardners were as close as the Three Musketeers, and with an inborn feeling that they had always been as great pals but that perhaps circumstances had thus far kept them apart. Concho kept to his role of sobriety and chaperonage, but the road bottle swiftly dropped its liquor lineage as it passed again and again between Rile and Verne who drank solemnly, wiped off the mouth of the bottle, and passed it across to the other.

"Old Paint" was worn out before they had got far from the environs of Horcado, but there were other songs, and they rolled out across the prairie land as the men who sang them rolled to the easy gait of their horses. "Oh, Susannah?" was shortly done to a turn, and at the end of the half-way mark to the O I C Ranch they were only on the fifty-fifth verse of "Oh, Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie."

They took their time and at noon Rile called a halt for time out while they ate the food he had had the Chinese proprietor of the Busy Bee put up for them with the remnants of the money they had not been able to drink up at the King Pin.

"No hurry, fellers," he said, as he climbed down from his horse when they reached a cool stretch of land where a spring bubbled up and wide rocks made a fine stand for a layout. "Might as well picnic right here, as you might say. They won't be lookin' for us so eager at that there O I C, and maybe a little snooze wouldn't go so bad."

They ate and let their horses range and when Rile and Verne promptly dropped asleep from the effects of the morn-

ing's potations in Horcado, Concho stayed awake, keeping watch. Or so he afterwards swore when the trio awoke with the shadows growing long and with tastes in their mouths as if they had been playing around coyotes' holes.

"Just so long's we're there for supper, I reckon it makes no never mind," Rile said philosophically as he cinched his saddle, preparatory to riding on. "Somethin' kinda tells me they'll be plumb glad to see us at this O I C, however come."

The afternoon had worn on towards the twilight hour when they rode on. It was descending over the range with the swiftness that men who rode these south-western ranges well knew. Soon the sun would drop beneath the horizon as if it had been dropped from a giant hand to stay there until the morning, leaving behind only the quiver of multicolours in the sky to show that it had ever been there at all.

They were still two miles from the O I C headquarters, though they knew that for some time now they had been riding on Carter range when the sun did go down behind the crags of the low, mountainous hills to the westward, leaving the range in the glory of its half light of misty memory. The half light deepened a little as the first stars began to prick out their pattern in the blue bowl of the sky.

From somewhere in the distance came the shrill call of coyotes, and the first night birds darted through the trees on silent wings, while here and there an owl hooted dismally. The three were beginning to regret their wasted time, as the liquor dulled, when at last they topped a rise and down below them, through a fringe of pines they saw the lights of a ranch headquarters—the O I C, without doubt.

Each of the three drew a breath of thanksgiving. Ten miles, and they had made a day of it. It wouldn't do to let it be known to the owner of the O I C—but in those few hours, so close had they become that they could have lived a lifetime together without becoming so much each part of the other.

They halted in a fringe of pines to look down on the place that might possibly be home for each of them for some time to come, if the owner looked on them kindly.

"There's the O I C, hombres," Concho said. "If you two are sober enough to see it. Some layout, huh? Looks like they might be lookin' for us, too—all lighted up like they was havin' a church festival or somethin'."

"Well, come on," Rile boomed in his husky bass. "Won't do us no good to disappoint 'em. What you think, Verne—you think some hellions around here's tryin' to start a war or somethin', seein' as how this here Obediah Carter is so plumb anxious to take on saddle bums like us?"

"You never can tell," Verne said, and his brain seemed a little less addled as a quick memory came to him. "Range wars come and they go, and a saddle tramp more or less never makes much never mind. He comes in kinda handy for a target."

He had said nothing, as yet, to his companions of his experience of the night before, but through the alcohol he had imbibed it was being stressed in his own mind. He had a feeling that right here at this place they were heading for he would find the answer to a lot of things.

The strange thing to him was that he had heard no hullabaloo in Horcado about the killing on the trail last night, and the evidence of brand blotting. It was gradually coming to him that there might have been things of which he had had no idea. He might have read sign on that killing wrong altogether.

It was just possible that the men with whom he had fought had come to remove the evidence of what was being done, and, finding their confrere dead and a man on the scene, somebody made to order to accuse of the killing, they had promptly done just that. But with Verne's disappearance, and their having no idea of who he was, the chances were that all signs on that death scene had been removed.

The big chances were that before long the range would hear of the sad "accidental death" of some range waddy called "Randy" who probably would be reported as having met his death at the hands of rustlers a long way distance from where he was actually killed.

Who had done that might remain a mystery—as is the way of range wars—if the men concerned in brand blotting did not want their work known. And only too apparently the real killer, whether he had been justified or not, had gone his way long before now and would put up no kick if his victim should not be found.

It was a mixed-up sort of reasoning, as Verne realized, knowing his brain was not in the best of condition to analyse and deduct. But it was the best he could do at the time, and every minute he was drawing nearer to the O I C Ranch

where at least, if fortune favoured him, he might find out a little more of what it was all about.

The cook was just getting ready to clang his triangle and give his raucous shout of "Come and get it!" when the three strangely met partners rode up to the O I C Ranch and headed for the cattle-pens where there seemed to be the most activity. A big man who unquestionably was boss was their immediate objective, and they rode straight for him, with one single glance of admiration for the home ranch which was far larger than they had expected. There was a huge sprawling ranch-house, rows of bunk-houses which would care for a big outfit, barns, cattle-pens, blacksmith shop, and a dozen other buildings that go to make up the headquarters of a cattle king.

Obe Carter, they saw at a glance, had not been over-rated, as far as his importance was concerned. He was a big man in the cattle country, and he knew it. His very bearing showed that, though there was nothing of pompousness in his attitude.

The ranch owner was a big, raw-boned, hard-driving man of fifty or thereabouts, in the very pink of his prime and strength and vigour. His outstanding features were a big, bony nose and deep-set grey eyes, with grim lines at the corners of his mouth, as if life, which once had run along in pleasant places, had suddenly turned against him until he had forgotten how to smile.

His brand was his own initials, as is the case in nine out of ten big outfits where a man has built it up himself and has not bought out some other brand. O I C—they stood for his own name, were his initials, Obediah Ignatius Carter. But he would have shot any man for calling him that and had spent a good many years and gone through many a hard-fought battle living it down.

Obe Carter was sitting his horse near the cattle-pens, seeing that the big group of men who were tending them were bedding them down properly for the night when Rile, Concho and Verne rode up and looked him over.

"Mr. Carter?" inquired Rile, still drunk enough to be exceedingly polite, though there were plenty of times when he forgot, or ignored, such little amenities.

"Yeah, that's me," snapped Carter, looking the three over with a frown and not altogether liking what he saw. At least two of the three were drunk, he saw with the one quick glance with which he sized up men.

"We heard you needed some hands—the bar-keep down to Horcado was a-tellin' us—so we———"

"Huh!" was the ranch owner's retort, and he jerked a thumb at the flat-chested Verne who was attempting to sit his horse with dignity. "Where'd you two drifters pick *that* up?"

"Him?" said Concho innocently, and went on with his lie with voice and eyes that were injured. "Why, we didn't pick him up none a-tall. He got up hisself, when he was a yearlin', and he's been a-goin' on ever since. We've knowed him ever since then and come lately he's been ridin' the river with us."

"Pardners, eh?" grunted Carter.

"Pardners?" interrupted Rile, and added gravely: "I beg your pardon, sir, but I believe they call us three trivlets—I mean driplets."

"I'm not going to call you anything now," snapped Carter. "And if I didn't need men I'd tell you to hightail the minute you stuck your teeth into some chow. As it is—well, unsaddle, and go on to the bunk-house. If you want to be called for anything, I'll call you hard enough in the morning."

The O I C owner watched them, musing, and then he laughed harshly.

"Triplets, hell! You three haven't known each other more than fifteen minutes when it comes right down to it."

He watched as the three cast him mournful glances and disappeared in the direction of the bunk-house.

"Three mounted tramps is what they called theirselves," he told himself. "Said Val Thorpe sent them. Well, we'll see. Maybe they know the front end of a cow from the hind end—maybe they know which side of a horse to climb on to—but if they can't take the acid test to-morrow when I try 'em out, I'll tie a dry hide to their tails and turn 'em loose. Can't do more than take a chance, the way things go these days."

He turned and headed for the ranch-house, just as his three new "hands" reached the bunk-house. The chow triangle was clanging noisily, and twenty or more cow hands were hitting it for the mess hall with all speed. The three new partners were not far behind, but stopped a minute or two to look over the bunk-house where they were to sleep after so many hours sleeping beneath the stars.

"Boys," Concho said, grinning as they entered the bunk-house and looked around to pick out the unoccupied bunks, "we got a boss that gets things done, even if he's got to do 'em his ownself. Didn't you savvy that?"

"We haven't got him yet," said Rile, as he tossed his war-bag on to an empty bunk he picked out as suiting him. "He said maybe he'd call us plenty hard to-morrow. Maybe he meant pretty early."

Verne said nothing. He was thinking of how good it would be to feel blankets over him on a bunk again, and to have a regular feed under the belt that had almost used up all its notches.

CHAPTER V

VERNE TAKES THE ACID TEST

SLEEP claimed the three oddly met partners too swiftly that night for them to get well acquainted with the rest of the Carter outfit, but by morning they were rested as none of them had been for some time previous. They were rearing to go.

They liked the looks of the O I C, and were ready to hang up their hats, if Obe Carter gave them a chance. The fact that something was wrong about the ranges had been born on them, also, for the rest of the waddies in the bunk-house had not been the rollicking happy-go-lucky lot to which Rile and Concho and Verne were used to meeting up with, but more inclined to be taciturn. At least those who had been questioned had hedged when questions had been asked, so the three had given it up and gone to bed.

It was shortly after dawn when the breakfast gong clanged, bringing the hungry lot to the big dining-hall. Mostly the men ate in silence, and after breakfast the "three mounted tramps" followed the other men to the pens just as daylight had well broken.

All the other men saddled up, then turned the remuda out of the big corral, leaving six horses in a smaller pen that opened up into the corral—a wildeyed lot as it was plain to see by the three who stood awkwardly waiting to be told what was expected of them. The men of the outfit left their saddled horses standing along the fence on the outside of the corral,

climbed to the top of the fence and hunched themselves there, rolling smokes as if that were the day's work ahead of them.

Not a word was spoken by any of them, except in mumbled monosyllables, until Obe Carter and a wizened-faced boy about twelve years old rode up and stopped near the three tramps, who stood in a group away from the rest of the men, awaiting orders.

"What's his name?" snapped Carter, nodding at Rile and looking at him as though he were piercing to his deepest secrets with those hard, cold grey eyes of his.

"Rile," the tallest of the trio answered promptly.

"Rile what?" demanded Carter. "Rile George or George Rile, or . . . Ain't your name got no handle to it?"

The tall saddle tramp merely shrugged. "Just Rile," he asserted carelessly. "There ain't no more to it."

"Huh! All right—have it your own way. What's your'n?" and he nodded at Concho.

"Just call me Concho and I'll come, if it ain't too far," Concho said disinterestedly, grinning broadly.

Carter growled something and swivelled his head and looked long and hard at Verne, sizing him up more thoroughly than he had the other two. Finally he said:

"I don't think it's goin' to make any difference what your name is, but what is it?"

"Verne," said the lanky, stoop-shouldered cowboy.

"Huh!" snapped Carter again. "Good names. All easy to call, and just like I told you last night, I'm goin' to call all three of you—good and hard. I need men—yes. But I don't hire men that would fall out'n a rockin' chair in an old woman's home. If you can't ride, rope, and shoot, I don't want you—and I'm goin' to find out about that pronto."

His eyes picked out the biggest man of the three and he barked orders.

"Drag your saddle into the main corral, Rile. Rope a bronc out of that pen and ride him. Take any of 'em you want, except that blue roan."

Rile said nothing but promptly entered the corral and headed for the pen. His eyes swept the horses there when he reached it. Then he threw away his half smoked quirly and his long arm rippled outward with the coiled rope.

It settled neatly over the head of a pied pinto and the next moment, with a few swift, lithe movements, he had the quivering horse snubbed. Saddling and bridling the un-

broken horse was the work of but moments to the experienced Rile, though the horse fought him with venom, dancing away as far as the rope would allow.

Rile went about the matter in a business-like way, unsmiling. This was all in a day's work, the work he knew best, and he was there to show. The saddle on, he touched the cinches, and seemed to be saying something soothing to the trembling animal. One foot went into the stirrup, then he was up in one lithe bound. He was looking down at the stirrups and settling his feet into them as a cowboy ran up and released the snubbing rope.

A roar went up from the crowd of watching cowboys as he landed in the saddle, and the boy's high soprano voice rose above the rest, jeering.

"Better tell us where to ship your things, Legs, before you try to ride that bronc, and leave some word for your mammy. We'll try to get it to her."

But the next moments were too filled with action for a reply. They were moments of weaving, primitive beauty that held the watchers silent for the moment because breaths were held. For the moment Rile went into the saddle, the pied pinto went into the air. But when he came down, Rile was still in the saddle, matching rhythm for rhythm as the pinto tried every trick in his little bag.

All the watchers could see for moments was Rile with his black hair gleaming in the morning sun as his worn Stetson flew off at an angle, and Rile's face between the ears of the bounding pinto with an expression that said he meant to do or die.

The drifter rode that sunfisher to a standstill. The cowboys whooped and yelled with glee as they watched the masterful performance of a man who was born to the saddle and had never got far from it. Breaking in new punchers was all the diversion that the O I C outfit ever knew—but putting bucking broncos in their place was meat and drink to Rile.

The ride was over swiftly, as if that pinto realized that a master was topping him, and that further display of his prowess was useless.

Concho was called next. He did not even give the boys much of a run for their money, and the show was free. He called the horse he was going to ride, a fiery-tempered young black with high-tossed head, and roped it the first throw. Saddling was not such a job, for the black seemed at first to

belie his high head and was fairly docile while the cinches were tightened. But the moment the snubbing rope was loosened and the cowboy who held it had jumped away, running for his perch on the fence, the black's head swooped down towards the ground—and pudgy Concho soared high.

He came down still in the saddle, though, as Rile had done, and rode that black ragged in a minute that seemed like a year to him and was a long, tense lifetime to the watchers. For many a year Concho had trained himself for a battle like this, and he was using his knowledge now, while the blood pounded in his brain, and shock after shock ran through his body as the black sunfished, whirled end to end, bucked and pulled every equine trick known to the horse that has run wild without the touch of man's hand on the rein or the feel of man's body atop his back.

The black was outraged, but Concho was a sticker. For the time he stuck to the black's back it looked to the cowboys perched on the fence that the horse would tear the wandering waddy to bits, but that was because they did not know Concho, or know how long he had spent catching and training wild horses when he was not nursing cows on somebody's ranch.

He was grinning and waving his ragged hat as finally the fiery black, a look of wonder and defeat in his eyes, stopped his shenanigans and trotted meekly around the corral.

Carter waved the conqueror of the black aside, without a word of commendation, though the man from the Rio Grande country had not expected any. He was grinning again as he got from saddle and sauntered over to his own companions, panting hard from the strenuous battle.

Just one more calculating minute the owner of the outfit stared hard at Verne, then made on abrupt gesture.

"All right, Verne!" Carter bellowed. "Your turn. Do your stuff. Rope that blue roan over there in the pen and ride him, and you're hired."

"Aw hell!" muttered a leathery old puncher to the man on the fence beside him, as he shifted uneasily. "The old man oughtn't to do that. What's he tryin' to do—get that Verne feller out of his way pronto? Why, that blue hellion will kill that flat-chested boy the first jump he makes!"

"Don't tell me that—tell it to Obe," his companion drawled, and grinned, but there was not much humour in the

twist of lips. "Anyhow, you wouldn't be wantin' me to tell the boss his business, would you? I can't. I stutter too bad. Obe says this ain't no dude ranch, and he aims to teach these fancy clothes gents a few things."

"Hmmph!" growled the first complainer. "Them ain't such fancy clothes they'd be takin' any prizes. Looks like two of 'em, at least, must a' been robbin' somebody's cornfield and got mixed up with the scarecrow. This boy now—well, I can't just say where he got that fancy combination, but——"

Even as they talked, though, the two men like the others of the outfit, had not taken their eyes off Verne. And if they had expected to see him hesitate, they were disappointed. Without a word, or a glance at the man who ordered him to ride a horse that it was plain to be seen was a killer, he had sauntered over to the pen, sizing up the horses there, particularly the blue roan, with a professional eye.

He was swinging his rope in a crazy kind of manner, as he looked the blue roan over from the tip of his ears to the end of his flowing tail. A rumble of mutters from the fence arose as the men saw what they believed evidence that Verne knew nothing about roping at all. And over by themselves, both Rile and Concho groaned.

"Goshamighty, Rile," Concho whispered huskily. "He's goin' to plumb disgrace us. Look at the way he's handling that rope. Why, he throws a rope like an old woman throwin' an empty bottle at a suck-egg dog. And that blue is a dodger, if I ever seen one. He'll never in this world. . . . Well, I'll be damned!"

Concho's words were cut short in his throat, and his expletive had been caused because a queer thing had happened in the pen. Verne's loop had wobbled about as if all it was going to do was knock his hat off. Suddenly, though, there was a quick flip, and the rope went over the blue roan's head *after* it had dodged. A shout went up from the fence, and the eyes of every man perched there were on the odd-looking cowboy now. What was this stuff he had pulled? Or was it just a lucky accident?

The blue roan seemed to have some ideas about the man who had roped him himself, though, for he walked out of the pen without tightening the rope, though his eyes were still wicked, wildly roving. Not so much as a quiver was in his muscles beneath the sleek hide as he stood still while Verne lifted and gently lowered the saddle to his back, while two of the O I C

boys held the rope. It was as if the blue roan was biding his time, after the surprise of that roping, just waiting, and willing to wait for a moment or two more when he would get that gangling cowboy where he wanted him—atop his back. It would be *his* advantage, then.

A strange look glimmered in Verne's eyes, as though he sensed such thoughts in the horse's head, but his hands told him the truth. The roan was standing utterly still, but as the cowboy who had roped him touched the muscles of flank and barrel, he could feel that every one of them were tensed, and ready, and there was the glitter of joy in coming battle in the animal's eyes.

Carefully Verne tightened the cinch, then bent down to see that his spurs were tight also. Giving a hitch to his chaps he grinned at the tensely waiting cowboys who held the hackamore.

"You fellers better line out," he drawled. "They's goin' to be some ridin' in a minute."

The two shot glances at their silent companions on the fence, then one of them laughed.

"Hombre, you ain't seen no movin' like you're goin' to see in a minute when you top that cayuse. I'm landin' atop that there fence in nothin' flat."

"Hightail then," Verne growled. "Here goes."

He was lifting his foot to the stirrup when the boy with old man Carter let out another high-piched yell.

"Hey, movin' pitcher cowboy, that bronc will throw you so high the bluebirds will build nests in your pockets afore you hit the ground! You'll hear them birdies singin', too, in just about one minute!"

"Damn that brat!" growled Rile. "If it weren't for wastin' a cartridge I'd gun him. But he ain't worth it. Neither is his old man. Carter has framed Verne, Concho, sure as you're born, and the pore kid ain't got a——"

Verne was in the saddle in a flash, and true to their word the two hackamore holders were making wild dives for the fence, after jerking the rope loose. Hardened men and daring riders as they were, every man of that outfit caught a harsh breath at Verne's daring as he landed in the saddle. Simultaneously the blue roan snorted as his head went down and his back humped up.

A concerted yell arose as the roan exploded into a crazy kind of weaving, interspersing it with short leaps, and bucks,

then reared straight up as if meaning to fall back on his rider—the most feared of any killer horse tactics. Verne stuck to the saddle, though—for a minute—as the big horse unwound, jamming his spurs as the roan slashed and leaped.

Suddenly and abruptly the roan's tactics changed as a gasp went up from the spectators. The roan had hit the sandy corral in a humped bunch as he came down. Verne left his back in a bat-like movement as though he were flying, and landed all sprawled out.

So swift had been the action that it was almost as if Verne had hit the saddle and the sandy ground of the corral in one motion. The watchers expected to see Verne lie still as he landed, but in a moment he was on his feet, shaking his head angrily even as Rile and Concho made one leap in his direction. They came to a standstill as he glared at them—once.

The horse was standing still again, nostrils flaring, the light of the conqueror in his eyes, but the next minute Verne was walking calmly towards him. No one spoke a word. Even the boy was quiet, watching Verne with a queer expression that suddenly had in it something of the admiration of a child for a hero, though it was reluctant.

The roan was as surprised as any of the men as again Verne went into the saddle with an agile leap. But the horse's surprise lasted only a moment, long enough for him to feel the rake of Verne's spurs along his flank. Then he went into action again, with the firm determination of this time finishing what he had failed to do the first time.

Verne had no more than grasped the reins when the roan, with a trumpeted snort, let loose a whole bagful of sky-rocketing tricks that would have unseated a robot glued to the saddle. Again he spun head to tail, in jerks that threatened to tear the heart from his would-be rider's body. Verne stuck for a time, though, even when the roan leaped high and came down on his four bunched feet in a single small spot.

Verne took almost a header then, but quickly adjusted his poise to the new attempt to rend him limb from limb. But the roan pulled his one big trick that never had failed to unseat a persistent rider. He reared, spun around all in the same motion, then came down on his forefeet, stiff-legged.

Instantly his hind legs shot out, as his head went down, and as instantly Verne left the saddle. He left it with as

prompt action as if a rope had been tossed over his head and he had been yanked to the sandy ground.

He lit all sprawled out again, but did not stop until he had rolled for a few feet, then came up sitting. A grin was on his face, but it was not the sheepish grin of the conquered. Rather it was one of apology that he had been forced to take a second spill before he topped that stubborn blue roan.

It was a grin that had a touch of the macabre, since it was made by bloody lips. Blood trickled down from a cut in his forehead, too, but his only attention to that was to swipe the back of a bony hand across his mouth and check as he scrambled to his feet.

The light of determination and unconquerable purpose was in his eyes as he stalked once more across the corral to the horse which disdained to move now that he believed he had finished this lanky persecutor for good.

For a minute the astonished spectators could not believe their eyes. Surely this stoop-shouldered, gawky, thin cowboy was not going to try *again!* With a shaking up like he had already taken, he ought to be good for a spell in his bunk for a month. But Verne was not glancing at them even. All his attention was on the panting blue roan that was looking at him defiantly as he advanced.

"Hey, stay off that bronc!" yelled Carter as he took in Verne's intention. "You've had a taste of what he can do. He'll get mad the next time, and kill you in a minute. The devil couldn't ride that horse with a saddle roll! How do you think you——"

Verne turned his head for just an instant in the direction of the man who had assigned him to the blue roan.

"I'm going to ride him," he said simply, as he caught the bridle rein again, and jockeyed into position beside the stirrup.

"Oh, you are, are you?" shouted Carter. "Well, go ahead and try it, you damned fool, if you're honin' to die—but you don't have to. You've proved yourself—good enough for me. I'll hire you for the nerve you've got!"

"I'll ride him," Verne said again, quietly, and not a word or a murmur came from the men on the fence, who could see by his eyes and his manner that he meant just that.

"All right!" Carter roared, but it was as if his roar was to cloak his uneasiness. "Ride that bronc if you're so set on it—and *can*. If you do I'll give him to you!"

Verne made no answer to that, and did not even glance at Obe Carter again. He shot a glance at his two goggle-eyed saddle tramp companions.

"Open that gate, Conch, when I get on," he called.

Then something else happened that brought fresh gasps of surprise and disbelief. Verne's long arms shot out, his left had caught the belligerent horse's lower jaw, his right caught an ear, almost as a man would treat a steer he meant to bull-dog. They heard the astonished brute's neck crack as it was twisted, and the blue roan went down in the sand of the corral. When the horse scrambled to its knees angrily, Verne was in the saddle, and the gate was open.

The horse shot out into the open of the rangeland, trying groggily to sunfish. His bawl of anger echoed back to the silenced watchers. But Verne's own cry rose above it.

"Ki-yi-i-i! Hee-ow-w-w! Whoooopeee!"

Cheers from the O I C outfit joined that cry as the men watched the horse, wild-eyed, frothing at the mouth and flecked with bloody sweat where Verne's spurs raked, tear out across the open with the lanky cowboy sticking to his back like a burr. Out in the open, across that wide expane of green Verne rode that blue roan hard, while the men cheered and the boy beside the owner of the outfit yelled in glee, his shrieks lifting shrilly above the bass roars of encouragement.

Five minutes later Verne rode up to the corral on a thoroughly beaten and cowed blue roan. The horse had quit at last, had recognized his master, hanging its head in token of submission. As Verne dismounted the brute stood spraddle-legged, lungs heaving and barrel pumping. The glance he shot Verne out of his bloodshot eyes was meek as the long-legged cowboy stood beside him gently patting his sweaty shoulder.

"He's a cowboy, ain't he?" yelped Concho. "I tell you it's hard to beat us there . . What'd you say we was, Rile?"

"Driblets," said Rile solemnly.

Again Carter made no comment on the ride, any more than he had had a compliment for Rile and Concho. But he was true to his word. He nodded to the panting blue roan as he rode alongside.

"Turn the horse loose on the range," he said. "He's your'n when you want him." He turned his head to speak to the wide-eyed boy who rode up beside him. "Lope around the remuda Tommy," he ordered, "and read 'em back here,

so these new waddies I just hired can rope 'em out saddle strings."

The O I C outfit had been robbed of their fun when the first two of the three saddle tramps had shown their stuff, but this third one had certainly given them a run for their money. Nevertheless, they were surprised when Obe Carter so casually made his announcement that now the three were members of the outfit. The men looked at each other in astonishment, then crawled off the fence and mounted their horses, each moving off in the direction to which he had been assigned to duty for the day.

The three mounted tramps had given no evidence, either by word or look, that they thought this an unusual way to welcome a new man; or that it was out of the ordinary for a man to so patently be framed as Verne had been—if he had not fooled them. Old Obe Carter watched the three narrowly as they saddled, listening to the foreman giving them some crisp orders about their duties.

Obe Carter was feeling disappointed, somehow, that Verne had not been killed. He could not understand it. Nor could he understand his own feeling, unless that he just naturally resented Verne showing up rigged out as he was. No man dressed like that had a right to live on a cow ranch, but there he was and Carter had been forced to hire the fellow in self defence. He couldn't have done anything else after that ride.

For the dozenth time Carter was looking Verne over, carefully studying him as the lanky cowboy saddled his horse. The rancher shook his head slowly. The fellow was too much for him. Looked as if he were dying, and then—

"Plenty of nerve, even if he is a lunger," the ranch owner told himself. "But there's a trick in it somewhere, and I'm bettin' on that. I'll watch that gent—I sure will. He's taken the acid test all right, except in gun work. He'll have a chance—plenty of chances—at that on this range, and if he's no good that will be his bad luck." He sighed heavily as he turned his horse's head towards the ranch-house porch. "Oh, well, if he can't sling lead, we'll do the best we can for him. We'll bury him."

CHAPTER VI

TROUBLE RANCH

VAL THORPE, the prophesying bartender of the King Pin Saloon, would have won his bet about the shifty-eyed Dave Stoak hands down, if there had been any takers. Or if there had been any one to follow the waddy who had been discharged from the O I C outfit, when he left town.

He started off in quite another direction from the Double Springs Ranch that belonged to Joe Peel when he finally bestrode his horse and started out of town. But the three saddle tramps who had preceded him away from the bar—the men who had so aroused his interest—had not even reached the spot where they had their noonday snack before he had started on a roundabout way over cross trails that would bring him in a circling manner to the Double Springs.

That was according to orders and arrangement. Stoak had to make the long tiresome trip each time he wanted to see Joe Peel, his boss, no matter how he grouched.

It was a long trip Stoak had to take, and an uncomfortable one, for he had to be certain that he would not be seen in all his circling about. The beaten trails had to be avoided. Slow going, too, for in many spots the sagebrush was thick, tall, and twisted, snarling about his horse's feet and legs; different land from the smooth grassy rangeland along the more beaten trails.

It was matted brush, with only little twisted lanes through which his mount could make his way, and lonesome. No sign of living thing greeted his eyes except sometimes a sage hen that scuttled through the brush, indignantly squawking at being disturbed; or a jack-rabbit that streaked away at the sight of the rider.

Off in the distance occasionally a coyote howled, perhaps surprised at being found out of his holt in the waning light of the afternoon. Once or twice a coiled rattler showed in Stoak's way, the shining baleful eyes defying man and horse to pass.

Dave Stoak had to tear his hand away from his gun, with the urge to shoot the serpents. For it was strict orders that he should not call attention to himself while on his way to the Double Springs and Joe Peel.

"Hell of a note," he muttered, time and again, "that a man can't gun a sidewinder."

Then he grinned. It would all be worth it, all the trouble he was being put to now, if things came out in this valley the way Peel wanted them to—and that was a certainty in Dave Stoak's mind. Only they would have to go carefully. Old Obe Carter was a fighting bob-cat to come up against. Nobody knew that better than Stoak.

But he grinned, remembering what he had said to Val Thorpe. Yeah, Carter's course was almost run in this valley, and Joe Peel was the man who could give him his comeuppance. Smart scheme Peel had. Smart man he was, too.

The first hint of darkness was beginning to cloak the range when at last Dave Stoak came up out of the last smelly bottom land he had negotiated, and rode boldly forward towards the ranch-house that he could see in the distance. Already the early moon had risen and was making tree and shrub cast distorted shadows.

From somewhere to one side came the croak of a bull-bat, an eerie sound for a man who was yearning to hear the voices of his fellows. Stoak was no man to ride the trails alone, and he would be glad when he got into the lighted ranch-house of the Double Springs. There would be food and drink there, too, and he would be pretty welcome with the news he was bringing to Joe Peel.

What a nice big slab of steak would taste like about now! As slow as he had been forced to go in that roundabout way that had taken him the whole afternoon when a beeline from town should have brought him to the ranch-house before had worked up an appetite for him.

"Could eat a whole cow, hide, hair and all," he mumbled. Then he grinned. "Well, anyway, it'll be dark 'fore I get there, or mostly. That'll mean the hands'll be back. Maybe there'll be a game in the bunk-house——"

He had ridden out into the open now and was following a ridge that gave him a clear view of the ranch towards which he was headed. It was a big place, a place which would have satisfied many a man—a man who was not possessed of Joe Peel's overweening ambition. His was an ambition that is the history of the West, where since first it was settled men have dreamed dreams of Empire, where they will be lord over rolling acres so great in expanse that a week would not suffice to cover them all by riding over them. Dreams that encom-

passed a one-man rule, with others driven out until one man alone should be lord of the land.

In fact, Joe Peel's was a dream that in too many instances made the green rolling range a ground of bloody tragedy, where men strove to hold to what they had, while others sought to wrench it from them. Fights that have made "range wars," the one blot on the opening up of the vast expanse of cow country that are the pride of a nation, and where only man's inhumanity to man was ever vile.

As he neared it the ranch loomed up as a prosperous-looking spot, even for a man who was so dissatisfied with it that he wanted to increase it to a kingdom of cowland. The ranch-house itself sprawled with its various wings under the shade of a grove of cottonwoods, and the rest of the layout was typical—adobe barns, cow sheds, saddle-house, blacksmith shop, big corrals with neatly whitewashed fences, and rows of bunk-houses big enough to shelter far more waddies than were required to run an outfit like the Double Springs Ranch.

Dave Stoak, nearing, grinned as again he noted that. What would many ranchers hereabouts think if they knew those bunk-houses were all occupied, too, harbouring men who were never seen in town, men whose one virtue was their ability at gun-slinging? Men who sold those guns to the highest bidder, and were biding their time until Joe Peel gave the word that the time was ripe for their use?

The sun had set and the light was already failing when at last Dave Stoak rode up before the ranch-house and swung down from his horse, ground-hitching it as he swaggered forward. The lights were already on brilliantly in the bunk-houses, and from them rose the sound of raucous voices, but there was no light in the ranch-house except back in the rear, where the sing-song voice of the Chinese cook occasionally rose in chant.

Joe Peel was home, though. Stoak knew that. He knew it as he heard the soft plunk of a guitar as he strode up the steps of the porch. His lips twisted a little. Guitars were made for use in singing Mex love songs, or for a rollicking cowboy lilts, but that was not Peel. Joe Peel sat there and plunked his guitar, bringing out weird music when he was most set on planning how to rout out from the valley everybody but himself and the men who did his bidding.

Through the open door Stoak could see the fire that crackled on the hearth, for the evenings were chill though the

days were scorching. A tall figure sat there, hunched over his guitar lovingly, twanging the strings, while the firelight reflected the glitter in his evil eyes.

Joe Peel himself was the only incongruous note in that peaceful setting. Not a doubt about it that he knew how to make himself comfortable, even running to luxury in pampering himself. From an inside room a red-shaded lamp threw a glow over the room, picking out the tanned bearskin rugs, the huge mahogany desk that was the room's central furnishing the deep chairs by the fire, and the deer and antelope antlers on the walls and over the fireplace.

Had it not been for those eyes of his, which were a dead giveaway only when he thought himself alone, Joe Peel would have been thought a handsome man, as indeed he was in his way. Tail and dark, he was always neatly clad, his boots shining, the concho band on his handsome white Stetson that lay on a nearby table glittering, his chaps soft and silky, and his silk shirt and corduroys the finest money could buy—as was the gaudy handkerchief that he wore carelessly about his neck.

Dave Stoak paused a moment in the doorway, taking in the quiet scene, as the guitar droned on. Then he scuffed his feet apologetically on the sill and coughed. Joe Peel looked up quickly and laid down his guitar.

"Oh, hallo, Dave," he greeted. "Was beginning to wonder if you was lost in the sagebrush or not." He waved to a chair opposite him before the fireplace. "Sit down," he invited, "and tell me the news. There's no one about the ranch-house but the cook, and he's in back, so you can spill all you know. Have you been hearing anything—like I told you too?"

"Ain't no news—that is not much," Stoak said, as he dropped into the chair and held his Stetson awkwardly between his hands, twisting it.

Why was it, he wondered, he always felt so uncomfortable in this man's presence? Joe Peel was no better than he was, and if he ever told what he knew about him . . . Sure he had news, but he didn't mean to tell it at once, and get sent on his way.

"Nope, not much news," he repeated. "Only it's like I told you. The O I C is short-handed as hell, and round-up's comin' on—almost here. Nobody won't work for Obe Carter if he's starvin'—that is, not many. And there's

some that would rather take a job herdin' sheep than take a chance workin' for the O I C, what with something happenin', and——

"Serves him right at that. Old Obe Carter is the closest-fisted, hardest-drivin' old devil that ever forked a home. Even if some things wasn't due to break, he'd have his hands full gettin' anybody to work for him. Val Thorpe at the King Pin Saloon was tellin' that only yesterday Obe was in town and he let out a yell for hands. Told Val to send him out anybody he saw wantin' a job."

"Well, did he get any," Peel asked, his lips pressing together tightly.

Dave Stoak laughed and shrugged his heavy shoulders.

"Maybe you wouldn't just call 'em hands," he commented. "At least not cowhands. But I seen two drunks—saddle bums—and a lunger headin' for Obe's outfit. Val sent 'em, he said."

"Fine!" Peel laughed shortly "I hope he gets plenty of that sort. Now, you understand thoroughly, don't you, Stock, that you're not working for me? And you'll obey orders about coming here in that roundabout way, so no one will know you're even in touch with me? You can do me—and yourself—more good that way. What I want you to do—all I want you to do right now—is to hand around Horcado, out of a job, and find out all you can, from everybody. It'll be worth a lot to me to know how many, and what sort of men go to the O I C, if Obe Carter can manage to get any at all. Wouldn't have any now if it wasn't that some of his outfit was so stubborn they'd stick to him whatever come, though Gawd knows why."

"I know it," growled Dave Stoak. "And I reckon I know *why* you want to know about who goes there. Them drunks and that lunger, huh! Old Obe'll toss 'em out 'fore they get grub."

Joe Peel was staring into the fire, his eyes narrow, calculating. But one hand gently thrummed the strings of the guitar on the seat beside him.

There's somethin' else you can help out about, too, Dave," he said. "You can let it slide when you're talkin', and there'll be plenty others to do the same. This here is a steer ranch. That's all, see? We don't run no she cattle. We raise a few steers, getting rid of the she stuff pronto, and we buy plenty other steers. We hold 'em and fatten 'em up on our

grass, and when the price is right, we sell 'em. Savvy? I want it to get around that I'll buy any man's steers, if they are priced right. I "—slowly Peel closed one eye, though he was not smoking, and the smoke from the fire was not filtering into the room—" I'd admire right well to buy some of Obe Carters steers."

Dave Stoak grinned and nodded his heavy head. " Uh-huh," he agreed. " Yeah, I reckon you would." His grin broadened. " I savvy. You'd like just a few of old Obe's steers for seed, huh?" He leaned forward and spoke in a lowered tone, though he had been assured no one was around. " Say, did you get them brandin' irons made."

Joe Peel nodded. " Yes, and they fit like a pocket in a shirt." He, too, lowered his voice. " Right bad, wasn't it, that we had had such hard luck out on the range first time we went to use one, just because some pilgrim had to butt in. Wonder who he was? Nobody ever saw him before, accordin' to what my men said that went out there to set the stage just right. Damn bad he got away—but oh, well, I guess he hightailed on pronto. No pilgrim's wantin' to get mixed up in another man's war, and the fellers give him a right bad scare, even if he did run a sandy on 'em in the end. Wonder who it was got our man, anyway? Whoever it is ain't sayin', and when things went wrong the way they did, I thought it was best to get the boys to bury Randy, and wait for another chance. Didn't want too many questions asked."

" Reckon not," Stoak agreed soberly.

" Yeah, I got the brandin' irons," Peel went on, almost as if talking to himself. " And I bought them Circle H G steers, too." He lifted his head and looked at the cowboy opposite him. " And there's another thing I want made plain, too, Dave. When I buy a brand of steers, and then sell 'em, I sell only what is counted and delivered. If there are any left on the range—they're mine."

" I see," said Dave Stoak, and another broad grin spread over his heavy, sullen face. " Yeah, that's smart. They'll always be some Circle H G steers on your range. You won't gather 'em too close, and I reckon you won't be sendin' out too many boys to comb the coulees and draws."

" I don't aim to bunch 'em too close any time," Peel said thoughtfully, and his wandering hand picked out a twanging chord on the guitar on the chair beside him. "Funny

how a man's fool ideas get him into trouble," he ruminated. "Take old Obe Carter. One time some puncher called Obe Carter's brand 'Oh I See.' That kind of tickled the old man's funny bone, if he's got one. Leastwise it put a fool notion into his head to leave more space between the O and the I—maybe so's folks would see the point. Anyhow, he left enough space and plenty to make an H out of the I, and it's easy any time to make a G out of a C.

"Nobody has ever tried to trim Obe Carter except a lot of rough hands that simply drove off his stuff—and they got caught, and shot or hung right pronto. But the time's comin' for him to be trimmed—plenty and proper. Trouble is he ain't met up with a man smart enough to do it before. But I'm goin' to. I'm goin' to levy on as many steers as he can lose and possibly keep on goin' after that."

Dave Stoak grunted as he twisted in his seat.

"Sounds all right to me," he said. "If you can——"

"No 'ifs' about it," snapped Peel. "You just do what I say, and you'll get your share, with no trouble a-tall. All I want you to do, so far, is to keep your eyes open and report to me, makin' sure nobody knows it. My range, as you know, is mostly back in the rough, because there's water there Carter claims the Twin Rivers water, and what everybody must think is that I'm keepin' my stuff back in the hills because I don't want any trouble with Carter—not yet. That's just between you and me, that past part, but you can make it plain to everybody you meet just why my cattle *are* back in the hills. Of course, I own the Diamond D in west of the Twins, but I'm not known in it, and won't be till the time is ripe to act.

"The way I've got it figured out now is this. The boys over at the Diamond D will make a run on Carter's stuff once in awhile but he won't never catch 'em with nothin', because they won't drive it. Savvy? I'll do my main work while they're makin' that kind of bluff."

He nodded, as he glanced up at Dave Stoak keenly, his black eyes glittering with the plans that were fuming in his brain.

"And, oh, yes, Dave, I forgot. I told Hep Rogers, who is supposed to own the Diamond D, that he could talk to you any time he wanted to send any word to me. I told him that would be safe, because you had orders that nobody would ever catch you comin' here."

"I see," growled Dave Stoak. "And when does all this business you've figured out start?"

Joe Peel grinned unpleasantly. "No use puttin' things off eternal. We've got it all talked out, all our plans made and Hep, he aims to make a play to-morrow. Then when old Carter goes on the prod and lights out with his men to the west to run Hep ragged—and finds out he ain't got a blamed thing—why, we'll be workin' on the east side. Better get as many steers as we can before the round-up. Right now he don't know how many he has got—and that's our chance."

Dave Stoak nodded, but in the back of his mind he was not convinced. He had worked too long for Obe Carter to believe he could be taken in so easily. He had a wholesome respect for the old rancher, and believed that now was the time to speak his mind.

"Yeah, that's all right—everything you've said, Joe," he said soberly. "But I got to tell you somethin'. Maybe you don't know old Obe like I know him. Old man Obe is short-handed and all, sure, but don't you go gettin' the idea he won't fight, when anybody monkeys with his cows.

"Maybe somebody in his outfit could tell somethin' about what happened to Randy, if it comes down to that—and they won't be tellin', you can be sure. Maybe they just put it down to a justified killin' and since nothin' been made of it, they've decided whoever sent Randy out with the brandin' iron, or maybe figurin' he was doin' a little brandin' on his own, they're just lettin' it go at that. But Obe'll fight all right—at the drop of the hat, if he thinks he's bein' put on. Have you got enough men for a showdown fight, if it comes to that?"

"Dave," Peel said confidently, "I never went into anything in my life till I was good and ready—and was certain I'd come out on top. Hell, feller, I've been two years gettin' ready for this. I bought in on the Diamond D, and nobody was the wiser, and ain't got no idea Hep Rogers is my man. So to start with I've got the Diamond D's fifteen men—all picked men and fighters. I've got my oufit here, more of them gunnies than anybody's got any idea, for nobody ever comes here to take a look around to see how many men I've got in my bunk-houses.

"More than that, I've got a gang that comes and goes, back in the hills—anywhere from twenty-five to fifty men—and they are the kind that count in a fight; hell-benders with

guns, and ain't afraid of the devil hisself. Tough hombres that will take any kind of chances, that will drive anything, anywhere, if there's enough in it for 'em, and that would rather fight than not. I'm not supposed to know any more about them than I do about the Diamond D, but they know where their dinero comes from, and they'll come when I call 'em."

Stoak had no protest to make to that, but he shook his head. He was still remembering that old man Obe Carter had shown he was pretty good as a fighting man many a time during his years on the range. He stood up and clapped on his hat, mumbling that he had to be riding if he was to get back to town before daybreak.

By the time he had clumped down the porch steps, and had reached his horse, some of what Joe Peel had said seeped in deeper, and he started to grin. Maybe old Obe was in for something, after all. Maybe there were others who could show him something about real fighting. As he swung into the saddle he was muttering to himself:

"Fired me, did you, Obe Carter? Said you couldn't prove it, but you believed I stood in with rustlers and knew plenty about your missin' stock, huh? Now look what you've gone and done for yourself. I doped out that Circle H G brand my ownself, and did it make a hit with Joe Peel! It's goin' to work, and Joe Peel has got the men to back it—men that'll fight like you do, you old buzzard. What'll you do against 'em. Why, you ain't got but twenty-three men, countin' them two drunks and the lunger—if you took 'em on. Obe Carter, I'm tellin' you you're goin' to need a hundred!"

CHAPTER VII

Three of a Kind

Everybody in the cow country who has ever hit a bunkhouse or a cow-town saloon knows that three of a kind beats a pair in a poker game. But nobody had ever heard of it working anywhere else, for few there were who could boast of ever having heard of a Three Musketeers, so famous in fiction, much less having read about them.

Old Obe Carter was not thinking in poker terms, either, or imagining that he might have drawn a winning hand in

hiring Rile's "driblets" when he set his men working that morning, after giving the three saddle tramps their baptism of acid with some of the toughest cayuses that ever were herded together in a corral. He was strictly business with them, and wanted them to know it from the go-off, and gauge him right.

"Now, you three fellers, listen," he said when they had saddled up and stood waiting for his orders which were of more importance than those of his foreman. That foreman was "boss" of the hands in name only, for every one of the men knew that old Obe himself had the final say, and in fact had as much use for a foreman, except out on the range, as a man has for ten toes on each foot.

"Listen," he repeated, gruffly. "We ain't workin' regular in this outfit yet, not so far as round-up's concerned. Grass ain't good enough to start round-up on, so we're just ridin' lines and keepin' a look-out for rustler sign. Lord knows, with what's been goin' on, we got a plumb right to look for them sidewinders. The lines are East Fork on the east, West Fork on the west, Horcado on the south, and north till it gets so rough you can't go no further—and that's plumb in the foothills."

The three new men were listening intently, getting an idea of the extent of the outfit which had signed them up. Verne had known it was a big outfit ever since the three had first ridden up. He had gathered something of the sort from the bartender in Horcado, but from what his new boss said it was a sight bigger than he had imagined. It was beginning to percolate to him that if somebody wanted a war with the O I C oufit that they were sure enough playing for big stakes.

"I never heard of three punchers ridin' in a wad," the ranch owner growled, "unless a war was on, but you three can ride together since you seem to be so set on it, until you can do better. All I want you to do right now is to ride out and learn the range and the lines. Hit your saddles and go due west until you strike West Fork, then turn north. If you get lost and can't find your way back to the ranch, just keep on a goin'. Maybe that might be just well."

There was an odd look on the faces of the other men of the outfit who had not yet ridden away, and a grim smile on Obe Carter's hard lips as the three mounted tramps merely nodded, and without a word jogged off without looking around.

Carter was still watching them as they disappeared to the west of the ranch in obedience to instructions. Carter glanced around at his other men, scowling.

"You boys scatter to your work," he snapped. "You're late gettin' goin' now." He jerked his head towards the boy in the saddle who waited near him. "Come on, Tommy, if you're goin' with me."

Carter also rode west from the ranch, though none of his men who scattered to north and south and east knew what was in his mind when he took that direction. He meant to watch those three new men. There was something fishy about them, particularly about the one who said his name was Verne. And too much was happening on the range these days for him not to use the utmost caution.

It was not that the three were saddle tramps. Saddle tramps were no rarity—were common enough, but that one who looked like a lunger—well, he was something different again. Lungers that could almost break a horse's neck with their two hands were decidedly another matter.

Maybe this Verne was not a lunger at all, though he sure looked it. Maybe he had been in the pen, was Carter's thought, which he did not particularly relish. Something in that. The fellow was too pale for a cowhand who had been regularly on the job. He must know something about the cow business at that, though, or he couldn't ride and rope as he had when he had conquered the blue roan.

No other man in the outfit could have put the twine on the dodging blue roan the first throw. Carter knew that, as Concho had sensed it when he had first seen the horse that had been labelled killer until Verne had mastered it. Not another of Obe Carter's men would have mounted that blue cyclone for a cold thousand dollars, and that lunger-looking hombre had not only mounted him, but he had topped him, brought him back as meek as Moses.

Those other two, Carter considered—the two who called themselves Rile and Concho—it was easy enough to place them. They were just what they looked, cowhands with an itch to ride along and find out what was behind the next horizon. They were clearly old range riders, and Carter was satisfied with them. He needed men and they would do until they took a notion to ride on again—as they probably would as soon as round-up was over and they had a silver dollar or so to clink together in their pockets.

The odd thing was that two old hands like this should be tied up with this fellow Verne. Carter never would have given Verne a chance, no matter how good a rider he was, or how he could handle unbroken horses, if the other two had not made it clear to him that he must take all or none of them. Obe Carter was not exactly in a position to pick or choose.

It was of Verne that the old ranch owner was thinking most deeply as he rode over the lush range, hardly conscious of the boy at his side, and certainly not aware that in Tommy's mind was thought of the same man who was claiming the old man's attention.

But different thoughts were in the boy's consciousness. That riding exhibition that Verne had given had sobered the youngster, and he was reliving each thrill as he rode along. Not what the man was, or might be was in his thoughts, but what he had done. He had topped the blue roan that everybody said could never be ridden.

Obe Carter, however, was not so charitable in his own thoughts. If Verne had ever been a range rider, he was musing, he had obviously been in the pen long enough to lose his tanned skin and get a good prison pallor. Maybe he had gone up for a killing; maybe for a rustling. For that matter, maybe he had escaped and there was a notice out for him this very minute!

Carter didn't want any jailbirds in his outfit, but his hands were pretty well tied now, needing men the way he did. He had to have men to combat the rustling. He knew Hep Rogers, of the Diamond D, for one, was a cattle thief, though as yet he had not been able to prove it, and he had to have men to combat the rustler. It was a pretty foregone conclusion to old Obe Carter that the Diamond D outfit would begin working on his cattle any day now.

The men ahead had drawn away until they were spots in the distance as the ranch owner rode after them, but he made no attempt to close the distance. Just as long as he could keep them in sight he was satisfied.

To the three tramps, this first day's jaunt was the beginning of an adventure. They had already seen and heard enough to know that they would get all they wanted of excitement, and as they rode along and Verne told them of his adventure the night before he hit Horcado, they were all the more sure of it.

It was the first time Verne had mentioned that little

affair of the branding iron, and both Concho and Rile were in complete agreement with him that it had best remain a secret among the three. At least until something came up that might make it necessary for him to mention it.

"Saddle tramps ain't got such good reps nohow, Verne," Concho mused, "that they can take chances of bein' thought plumb innocent when there's brandin' goin' on and a killin' on the side that nobody says nothin' about."

Rile nodded sober agreement to that. "Yeah, just forget it, hombre, till you have to remember. Somethin' tells me that ain't goin' to be so long, either. I kinda feel things just a-boilin' on this range and right likely to spill plumb over any minute. Don't know why. Guess it's 'cause I'm funny that way. Like my old Aunt Rilly that could tell when a thunderstorm was a-comin' 'cause her rheumatiz bones started to kick up a ruckus."

Verne did not know why it was, himself, but probably the mention of a woman, even Rile's Aunt Rilly, made him remember a few minutes back before they had ridden off across the range. The trail west from the O I C that they had been ordered to take ran along the front yard fence of the ranch-house, which stood in a grove of cottonwoods and weeping willows two hundred yards west of the horse pens, facing south towards open prairie—a pleasant outlook.

As they had passed the house Verne was remembering now that he had seen a woman standing on the front gallery, obviously watching them. He noted her principally because a woman was such a rarity in his life. He so seldom saw one, unless it was a dance-hall girl in some saloon—and such had no interest for the lanky cowboy.

He had got only a glimpse of her through the shrubbery, but she looked far too young to be Obe Carter's wife, and Tommy's mother. He remembered the gleam in her hair, too, that he had caught as the sunlight touched it, and the willowiness of her young body as she had stood there, poised.

Verne had wondered then, as he wondered now, about the occupants of that grim, rambling old ranch-house. But it was only a fleeting, idle wonder, and he promptly forgot it. There were too many other things to think about.

The early morning air, so clear, so vitalizing with the sunlight that shone down from the blue bowl of the sky, made Verne want to be up and doing. Anything at all, just so it was movement. At the edges of the woods that flanked the

green of the range, flowers flamed and nodded their heads in greeting.

In the distance the green river was edged with the deeper green of tall grass and nodding willows, and the pines in the foothills ahead of them were a blue-topped green that seemed to defy any other to rise above them in beauty. It was a day to be alive—a great day.

Verne was prepared to enjoy it to the utmost, secure in the knowledge that at the end of it he would return to the ranch and to a big feed where he would no longer have to worry that there was not even a half dollar left in his pants pockets.

They had ridden far into the draws of West Fork and were completely out of sight of their following boss and Tommy when Rile, who was leading the way, pulled up and stopped in a hidden pocket. He turned his horse to face the others, and held up his hand.

Verne looked at his saddle companion in surprise as Rile showed he meant to say something of importance. This serious-looking Rile was a different man from the rollicking, happy-go-lucky that he had known up till now. He hadn't thought Rile ever had a serious thought in the world. But Rile was in deadly earnest now.

"Well, fellers," Rile said shortly, "I reckon here's as good a place as any. First chance we've had to be plumb alone since we hit this here O I C outfit. So here's where we come to a showdown—or we don't. Make it whichever way you're a-mind to."

He bent a sober, calculating gaze on the lanky young cowboy who had halted his horse before him.

"Verne," he rumbled, "it's like this. Concho and me have been pardners for five years, and we have nursed cows and gallivanted around the country about everywhere except in this Twin Rivers country, which is plumb new to us. May-be we ain't no angels, but we ain't rustlers, and we ain't killers, neither—unless its pushed on us. Concho was mildly soused and I was plumb drunk when we picked you up at the King Pin, or chances are you'd never be here a-tall. Not so far's we're concerned.

"I never got cold sober, not even all night, until we got to that corral this mornin', and I saw what all three of us was up against—in particular, you Verne. So right then and there I was glad we was triplets 'cause that would a' give us a chance to do somethin' if anything had happened to you—

which it didn't. But here's the cold facts, as we got to look at it now. It's all right, this here thing of ridin' triplets, but if we're goin' to, from now on, and are goin' to back each other's play, as me and Concho would sure have backed yours thing morning, we've plumb got to know something about one another.

"I've told you all that matters about Concho and me—there ain't nothin' much except us ridin' to kingdom come and stoppin' off here and there until we could make enough dinero to go on a piece more. Now it's up to you. Speak your piece, Verne. We want to know somethin' about you. We want especial to know how a feller that looks like you do, like he was just about makin' a date with Boot Hill most any minute, can do the things you did this mornin' and get clean away with 'em."

Rile stopped, his eyes boring into Verne's, but they were friendly eyes, eyes that said he hoped Verne could stack up so that the triplets could become a settled combination.

Verne laughed as he gazed back at Rile. "Sorry I can't give you my whole pedigree, *hombre*," he said, with a quirk of his lips, "but some of the papers got lost in a fire one time. Anyway, here's what I can give you without no documentary proof. I was born on a Texas ranch, of more or less respectable parents, or leastwise that's the reputation they had. I grew up on that ranch, and associated with cows, most principally, until I was past twenty-one, and then——"

"Hold the deal a minute," drawled Rile. "You don't look twenty-one now, spite of your stoop and your look of havin' lived maybe a plenty."

"I'll be thirty in about fifteen minutes," Verne said calmly. "You can get the birthday present ready. Anyway, as I was sayin', I stayed on the old ranch until I was past twenty-one, then I drifted away. I didn't have much idea of where I wanted to go, 'cept I thought I wanted to see things, as maybe both of you know that feelin', so what I do is to go from one big cow outfit to another in the north country. With the first outfit I ties up with up there, there's another puncher that I don't cotton to, and he don't like me no better than I like him.

"You know how it is. Sometimes you just see a fellow, and know he won't do—for you—the first word you hear him speak. That's the way it was with me and that *hombre*. No matter what his name was. He was too blamed

ornery to be satisfied with one name, anyway. I quits the job and goes to another outfit, because this sneakin' hound was always tryin' to put me in bad.

"Well, I ain't been with the new outfit long, until this gent shows up on the same job and starts his old tricks. I quits again and moves on, because I'm a stranger in a strange land and don't want trouble. I ain't been with this third outfit a month until this *hombre* shows up again. By that time, I'm tired of running from trouble.

"I figure this gent thinks I know something on him, which I don't. Thinks I'm spying on him, and he goes to spying on me and trying to frame me. Finally, it comes to a showdown, like them things have to come.

"He jumps me one morning, when we were saddlin' up, and tries to make me draw, so he can be in the clear. I ain't too hard to make draw maybe, and I go for my gun. He fumbles his hardware some way and don't get it until I've bent my gun over his head.

"The boys scrapes him up and takes him to camp. They get a doctor and he says this chap won't never wake up from the nap he's takin'. The range foreman is a good scout and he takes me for a little talk.

"'Cowboy,'" he says, "you're a jam up good hand, and I like you a whole lot. Like you too well to see you hangin' on something and kickin' at nothing. I don't know much about this *hombre* you tangled with, and I don't like the way he rides. I wouldn't took him on, but orders come from higher up—that he belongs to our spread. I got an idea that there's enough money back of him to hang the President of the United States. I hate to lose you, but I'd rather you got lost by a bronc runnin' away to Mexico with you than for you to be led off with a rope. So—you know what I mean."

"I did know what he meant, and I let my bronc run away with me. For two years I've drifted, and I did plenty besides punch cows. Such as riding in a Wild West show in the East. Night work. That's why I'm so pale, but I'm rearing to get back on the range, so I took you fellows up on this O I C deal. Them's the cards, face up on the table."

"Well," said Rile, "Concho and me has both done worse things than you say you done, and we done 'em a purpose. We've told bigger lies than what you are tellin', if you ain't tellin' the truth. I'm satisfied to take you on."

"Me, too," said Concho.

"Then, we'd better get on and try to earn our beans," said Verne.

"Just a minute," said Rile. "There's just one more little thing before the house. This O I C is a straight, square ranch, but there's something wrong. Best I could learn from the old hands, there's work here for about fifty men at round-up, and Carter hasn't got half that many. Things are pretty bad, when a cowpuncher won't face 'em. We ain't fell into no bed of roses, and we need about two more eyes apiece. Now, let's ride."

Obe Carter and Tommy had passed about a quarter of a mile to the south of the three tramps while they were hidden in the pocket. They rode out into the narrow, open valley and saw four men, with a bunch of cattle, headed for the stream. Obe Carter made for them.

The three tramps gained the edge of the timber and peered out into the open valley just in time to see four men rushing a little band of cattle for the stream and leaving fifty or more grown steers behind, while old Obe and the boys were storming up the valley. The four riders gained the stream and followed their cattle across. Carter didn't halt, but tore on across West Fork, with Tommy at his side.

West Fork was called a river, but it was just a chain of pools, with long shoals and shallows between. There was but one little valley on the west side, the ground rising sharply and covered with scrub and other brush. As Carter and the boy disappeared into the fringe of trees and brush along the stream, Verne said:

"Come on, boys. The old man and that boy are riding into a trap that was set on purpose."

Instead of going to where Carter had crossed, which was about two hundred yards below them, Verne led straight for the river, struck a shallow, and went across. Just as they reached the west bank, guns began to crack spiritedly below them.

Old man Obe and Tommy sat side by side on their horses, out in the open valley. Hep Rogers and his right hand man, Bud Kelso, with two others of his gang, had gained the brush, turned and fired. Verne saw Tommy fire once, and then his horse reared and fell, and both horse and boy lay still. Obe Carter was shelling the thicket.

Suddenly, something tore through that thicket. It was a lone rider, and he was doing more things with a horse than a

woman can do with a hairpin. Verne's gun crashed, and one of the Diamond D riders went down. It roared again, and Bud Kelso got a bullet in one arm. Rile and Concho came into that thicket, and the whole place was smoking, but the two remaining Diamond D men, led by Rogers, saw that three of a kind was a winning hand, even in a gun fight, and escaped into the brush. Verne and his companions rode into the open just as Obe Carter swung from his saddle and ran to where Tommy lay on the ground, his leg under the dead horse and his young face twisted and white with pain.

"Roll the horse off of him, boys," ordered Verne, grabbing the animal's forefeet. When the boy was clear, Carter knelt by his side.

"Tommy! Tommy boy," the old man called, but there was no answer. "Good God! He's dead!"

"No," said Verne, who had his hand on the boy's pulse. "He's just knocked out. Get some water from the creek, Conch."

It was ten minutes before the boy opened his eyes, and then he cried out with pain.

"What is it?" asked Verne.

"Oh! Oh! My leg hurts," panted the boy.

"It ain't broke," pronounced Verne, when the chaps had been removed, the boot taken off and the leg examined. "It's just smashed and bruised and the muscles torn. It hurts worse than a break. I've had 'em both. Only thing we can do is to get him home."

"Yes," said Carter in a husky voice, "and his bronc's dead."

"I'll take him," said Verne. "One of you boys take his saddle. Hand him up to me, Rile. We'd better get going before some of that outfit comes back. You lead, Mr. Carter. You know the shortest way. That's right, kid. Hold on to me," as big Rile set the boy on a saddle roll made of all their coats. "It'll hurt like sin when the blood goes into that leg. I know, but we'll have to stand it."

"I'm—I'm all right," quavered Tommy as the horse began to snort and side-step, "but this old wall-eyed hellion is goin' to dump us. He won't pack twice."

"Don't you worry," crooned Verne. "Just hang on to me, and we'll ride him on a moonbeam. Let's go, Mr. Carter, while we can."

Tommy's leg hurt cruelly, but he was almost happy. He

was having a hard time to keep from crying, but he was riding an old heller that his daddy never would let him gét on. Also, he was hugged up in the hard arm of the tramp that had busted the blue roan all to hell, and that was good enough company for Tommy Carter.

Rile and Concho were bringing up the rear.

A mile away from the ranch they came into a wagon road and were riding side by side when Concho suddenly remarked:

"Rile, if old man Obe knowed he had neighbours like them, what the hell do you suppose he meant by takin' a kid into the mess?"

"I don't know," grunted Rile, "but I'm convinced, converted, and completely saved on one thing. That Verne may be on the dodge, but he'll fight the United States Army with one clod of dirt and a broken arm. He didn't know whether there was four men or a thousand in that thicket, and didn't give a damn. He can raise more hell with a gun than an Injun can with a tomahawk. If I ever have any gun trouble with him, I want it to be after he's got a lily in his hand and a little tin 'At Rest' sign on the lid of the box."

When they reached the O I C they stopped in front of the rambling old adobe ranch-house. There was no one in sight about the place, either at the house or the bunk-shack. Rile took Tommy down from his perch and Verne dismounted. His arm that had held Tommy that five miles was numb.

"Let Verne pack me," pleaded Tommy. "He knows how."

Verne took the boy in his arms and turned towards the house.

"Rile," said Carter, "you and Conch take the horses to the corral. We won't ride no more to-day, I reck'n, but I aim to take that Diamond D outfit apart to-morrow."

Unwittingly, Obe Carter was preparing to walk square into the trap that the shrewd Joe Peel had set for him.

Verne followed old man Carter into a wide low-ceiled hall. Coming in from the sunlight, Verne could see nothing at first. He heard a woman gasp and heard Carter growl:

"Now, don't throw a fit. It's just a banged up leg and no bones broken."

Verne wanted to punch Carter's jaw for speaking to his wife in that tone. He was following on towards a door when Tommy piped out:

"I'm all right, sis. It—it don't hurt much."

They entered a big room in which there was a fireplace and a bed. Verne laid the boy on the bed and began stripping him.

"Here, I ain't no baby," objected Tommy. "You can't do that."

"Steady, old-timer," said Verne. "I've stripped bigger ones than you. I'll fix you so you can see company, when I tie yo' shirt tails together. We'll have to have some hot water and towels, Mr. Carter."

"Get some hot water and towels," Carter said to some one behind Verne as he stood helplessly watching Verne undress the boy. "Better get the liniment bottle, too."

With the boy's legs naked to the hips, Verne stood looking at him. He was a frail, slender little fellow, and his skin was smooth and white as alabaster, except for that left leg. From the bulge of the calf to the hip it was horribly bruised and already discolouring.

The hot water came, and Verne had the leg swathed in hot towels in a jiffy. No one spoke.

Finally Verne removed the towels. "Now have you got some iodine?" he asked.

"Yes," said a low voice behind him. "I'll bring it."

"There you are, old-timer," said Verne, as he finished painting the bruise. "That's all I can do. It don't need liniment and wrapping. Let it have air. I'll be going now."

"No!" protested Tommy. "I want you to stay here. I——"

"Hold the deal," chuckled Verne. "Mr. Carter hired me to nurse cows and not boys."

"Then you'll have to play like I'm a yearlin' with a busted leg."

"Huh! Stay here with him a while, Verne," growled Carter. "I want to go down to the pens. Be back pretty soon."

As Carter's spurs jingled off the gallery, Verne heard a sob, and a woman passed him, going to Tommy's bed. He hadn't seen her face, and he didn't see it now. She knelt by the bed, caught Tommy in her arms. All Verne could make out was a beautifully rounded body, neck and arms, and a lot of gold-brown hair. Tommy put out a hand and laid it on her glossy hair.

"Don't cry, sis. I'm all right. I wanted to cry, too, and I wanted you, like everything, but you know how pap is."

"Yes, I know how he is," sobbed the woman. "Taking a child like you out to do a man's work."

Tommy pinched back the tears that would come to his eyes, and said:

"Aw, sis, it was just a bronc fell on me. That might happen to anybody."

The girl looked up at him then. His hat was hanging on a bedpost. No one had noticed it, but she did.

"Why—Tommy!" she gasped. "How came that bullet hole in your hat? Tell me."

"You—you tell her, Verne," said Tommy. "I—I didn't aim to, but she has to know now."

The girl stood up and turned, facing Verne. He had seen all the queens, but he had never seen a face like that. She was not beautiful. Her brow was low and broad and her tear-misted eyes were large and blue. Her features were even, and she would be rated a pretty girl, but it was not that.

It was something shining through. The flame from the heart of a real woman. They just stood looking at each other until Tommy said:

"Verne, this is my sister. I call her sis, but her name's Bess. That's Verne, sis. He's the fellow that busted the blue roan this morning. Tell her, Verne."

"I—I'm sorry, Miss Carter," said Verne, 'but—perhaps you had better let your father tell you what happened."

"No, no," she said. "He won't tell me anything about it. He—he thinks a girl—a woman shouldn't know anything outside the house."

"Then he might not want me to tell you."

"He wouldn't," said Bess fiercely, "but I have a right to know what he does with Tommy. We won't tell father, will we, Tommy?"

"I wouldn't tell anything you told me not to tell, sis," said Tommy. "Go ahead and tell her, Verne. I don't know all of it. I was clean out."

Verne told her, quickly and graphically, expecting every moment to hear old Obe Carter's spurs clinking in the hall.

"Thank God," said Bess Carter when he had finished, "Tommy won't be able to ride for a while. You won't understand, Mr. Verne, but there was only Tommy and me in this old house, since—since mother went. Tommy was only

four then. Tommy always rode, but when he was twelve father got him a gun and said he was going to make a hard-riding, straight-shooting man out of him. That broke my heart but now—— Oh, Mr. Verne, I need Tommy. If—if anything happened——"

"There, there, Miss Carter," said Verne in a gentle tone. "He'll be all right now, with you to nurse him."

"I know, but—look at that bullet hole in his hat. It might——"

"Yes, it might, but it didn't. We won't take him where there are bullets any more."

"There'll be bullets everywhere, if—— They have been trying to drive father out of the Twin Rivers country for a long time. Old Gregg has told him they would gang on him some time. Father don't tell me anything, but Gregg does. He says the O I C range is so dangerous that father can't get hands, and——"

"Oh, those things happen some time or other to all cow-men," said Verne. "It'll come out all right. You'll be all right now, Tommy, with your sister. I'd better get down to the pens."

"All right, Verne, but be sure you come back to see me," said Tommy.

Verne stooped over and patted the boy's shoulder, then gripped his hand, and went out without a word. He was thinking of himself at twelve. No mother, his father a kind-hearted but rough cowman living on the Texas prairies.

Maybe it had made him tough, but he had got a glimpse of the wonderful thing he had missed in life. A sister, a mother, any understanding woman who would have loved him and stood by him as his pal. Maybe he would not be wanted for murder now and scouting here in this wild country, with his life in danger every hour, if he had known such a pal at Tommy's age.

Thoughts were awake in Verne's mind that had never been there before as he walked on towards the pens where old Obe Carter stood talking to Rile and Concho.

CHAPTER VIII

BATTLE PLANS

"WHO is that man, Tommy?" asked Bess Carter when Verne was gone.

"Tramp."

"What!"

"That's what pap said. Three of 'em come here together yesterday evening. Pap looked at 'em and said they was three mounted tramps."

"Are the other two like that one?"

"Naw. There ain't no more like him. The other two, Rile and Concho, are just plain bush-horners, like old Gregg and them. They're both good. They can ride and rope, and I reck'n they can shoot some, but this Verne—— Say, sis, he's the strongest man I ever seen, and——"

"Say 'saw,' Tommy."

"Strongest man I ever seen—saw, I mean. Why, he just caught that blue roan by the jaw and one ear and twisted his neck until he fell. Then when the blue got up, Verne rode him ragged. Why, sis, he carried me all the way from West Fork on his left arm, just like I was a baby—and I ain't. And when he talks—— Why—sis, when he'd ask me how I was gettin' along, he'd look down at me kinder funny, with them big brown eyes, and say in a funny voice, 'How you makin' it, old-timer?' I—it sounded just like you do, sis, and I had to squinch my eyes to keep the tears from comin'."

Bess Carter turned away from the motherless boy and went to a window. She had to "squinch" her eyes to keep the tears from coming. She loved Tommy.

Down at the pens old Obe Carter was asking some questions on his own account. When he asked questions, they came like pistol shots and they had to be answered. He had found Rile and Concho leaning against the corral fence, smoking in silence. Carter went at once to the business in hand.

"Now, see here, you fellows," he snapped. "I want to know some things from you. I know what you are, Rile. You're a university man gone wrong. You can talk cow country, but every once in a while you slip and say something in yo' native tongue. I ain't askin' nothin' about you. I've had plenty like you. And, Concho, you cut yo' teeth on the spokes of a chuckwagon wheel in a cow camp, and ain't never

known nothin' else. What I want you to tell me is about this Verne fellow."

"What about him?" drawled Rile.

"That's what I want to know. I'm just a little afraid of men that don't care a damn if they get killed, and he don't. Another thing. If he's just a driftin' waddie, like you two, how come he looks like he's been in jail or something? I thought he was a lunger at first, but a lunger can't break a bronc's neck with his hands, and then carry a boy five miles on one arm. I ain't in no shape right now to have men workin' for me that don't come clean with me. You two are partners. Where did you pick this drifter up? Out with it."

A glance shot between Rile and Concho. The little puncher kept silent. Rile said:

"Yes, Conch and me are partners and drifters. We picked Verne up in Horcado. You seen him in action, and you know as much about him as we do. What we think about him may not mean anything to you, but we think enough of him to tie to him. If you don't want him, you don't want none of us."

"It ain't a question of wanting," said Carter shortly. "I need men, and you fellows all seem like good hands. Looks like I'm going to have plenty of trouble, and I want men I know I can tie to."

"Sorty late gettin' 'em," said Rile. "All you can get now is saddle-drifters that's out of a job. You can't tell anything about any of 'em until you try 'em. Looks like you tried Verne some to-day."

"Yes," snapped Carter, "but I want to know——"

"Just a minute, Mr. Carter." Rile had completely forgotten his cow-talk. "You have found out all about Verne that you'll ever find out from me. Yonder he comes. He can tell you what you want to know. Ask him. If you don't want the three of us, all you have to do is to say so and we'll hunt another job."

There was no bluster about it. Rile had just made a cold flat statement, man to man, and Carter knew it had to stand.

"All right, I'll keep all of you," he said, "but I expect you two to be responsible for Verne."

"That may be a pretty hard job," smiled Rile "but if you'll find somebody to be responsible for us, we'll try it."

Carter saw that he had made a foolish request of the two

punchers and, turning, he strode off towards the house. He met Verne, stopped, and talked a moment, then went on.

"Old man seems sorty pestered," said Concho, as Verne came up.

"Yes," replied Verne, "and I think he's got something to be pestered about."

"That boy hurt very bad?"

"No. He'll get all right in a few days. It's range trouble."

"Yes," drawled Rile, "we seen some of it this morning. Conch and me were just waiting here for you to come, so we could hold a little session."

"What about?" asked Verne.

"Why, looks like we ought to decide whether we're going to stay here and risk lead poison, or hunt better range. This is likely to be the last time we'll all be present and voting, if we ever get a mile from the pens on O I C mounts again."

"You boys do as you like," said Verne. "The matter is already settled for me."

"Settled?" asked Rile.

"Yes. I'm broke. I haven't even got a pair of boots and a decent shirt. This is a job. Besides that, I wouln't sign on with an outfit, then jump the job because a little rough stuff comes up."

"Spoken like a gentleman and a top hand," said Concho. "Let's go see if the cook had anything left from dinner."

The men all came in by nightfall. None of them reported anything out of the way, except that two of them had seen a dead branding fire up the West Fork valley. Carter told them what had happened that day, and that he meant to have a reckoning with the Diamond D next day. None of them said a word. There was not a change of expression on a single leathery face.

At supper, in the cook-shack, Verne looked the men over. There was not a young man among the twenty old hands. They were men from forty on, who bore the wrinkles of many seasons under the scorching sun.

Concho had said the bunk-house looked like an old soldiers' home. Verne knew what it meant. These hard-faced old riders had been with Carter for years.

The O I C had been home to them, and they would never quit it, no matter what came. Younger men had seen the

writing on the wall and quit, or refused to sign on. Bess Carter had given Verne a hint of what that writing was, but he had not mentioned it to Rile and Concho. He meant to find out more about it.

Verne looked at grey-haired, wizened old Gregg, who sat at the head of the table by common courtesy. The old puncher seemed almost speechless, grunting and making signs when he wanted food. Bess had said Gregg told her things. Verne wondered if the old leather-faced cowman really could talk.

After supper Gregg went off to the ranch-house and was gone an hour. When he came back he motioned Verne out the door and led him clear away from the chance of being overheard. Then he rolled a smoke and said.

"Verne, you're a new hand, and I don't know anything about you, but I like the way you're built." Gregg stopped and smoked in silence a full minute. Verne had no idea that Gregg had got his specifications from Bess Carter and Tommy. At last, Gregg went on.

"The O I C is in one hell of a mess. Obe Carter is one of the squarest, fairest men that ever forked a bronc, but he's so damned set in his ways that he'd die dead before he would listen to anybody else. I'm the only one that can talk to him, and he don't pay me as much mind as he would Tommy."

Verne said nothing. He was a good listener.

"Here's what Obe's up against," Gregg went on presently, "and everybody but him can see it. He's been the big boss of the Twin Rivers country for years. I'm not saying that a lot of the little outfits that located in the country weren't rustlers. I know some of 'em were, and I helped hang some of 'em. Trouble was, they all looked like rustlers to Obe. It got so a little outfit didn't have no chance at all, and they quit trying—that is, the honest ones that would make good neighbours and help keep rustlers out, quit.

"That leaves the whole country open for crooked outfits. One by one the little ranches has been took over by gents like Rogers of the Diamond D. They're a new kind of rustler that Obe don't know how to handle. He can't ketch 'em with the goods I ain't sayin' Obe is the first big cowman that's ever pulled that fool stunt, but Obe has done it, and done it good."

Verne frowned. "Well, what is he going to do about it?" he asked.

"He's going to try to handle 'em like he used to when there was one thief to where there's a dozen now. The old times when a thief was too damned lazy to be honest, and too ignorant to be a successful thief. There's a new tribe come on, and they've about got him surrounded.

"He intends to take the whole outfit over in the mornin' and call the Diamond D."

"Well, you can't blame him, can you?" said Verne. "They not only ran off with some of his cows this morning, but they took a few shots at him and Tommy."

"No, I reck'n I can't blame Obe for bein' sore at Hep Rogers, but here's where Obe's crazy some more. His wife dies on him about eight year ago. Bessie was around twelve and had went away to school right smart. When his wife dies, he brings Bessie home and pens her down here to ride herd on Tommy.

"Well, I reck'n they weren't much else for him to do. But about six months ago, after a pretty hard year with rustlers, Obe take a notion he's goin' to make a he-man and a gun-slinger out of that frail, skinny little boy. I tried to talk to Obe about it to-night and show him what he had dang nigh did to-day.

"He just laughs and says that little ruckus won't hurt Tommy. It'll just put hair on him and make him hungry for rustler meat. If things break wrong for Obe in this mess, he's goin' crazy. He ain't got nobody but a lot of us old fellers. A real band of hard-riding rustlers can clean him to a milk bunch, and——"

Gregg stopped. Verne smoked a minute in silence, then:

"Gregg, I'll bet you haven't talked that much at one time in twenty years. Why are you telling me all this? I'm for the O I C, and I aim to stick, but I'm just a cowhand, and a new one at that. Come clean. Why are you telling me? Trying to pump me, because you think I might be standing in with these rustlers?"

"No," said Gregg, slowly. "I don't think that about you. I——Oh, dammit, I'm tellin' you because Bessie Carter told me to tell you. She's the best woman that ever lived. If she hadn't been, she'd 'a' poisoned Obe and took Tommy to a civilized place to bring him up. She nurses the boy through

every ailment a kid can have, from hives to hydrophoby, then about the time he gets his grass teeth cut, Obe goes crazy and takes him to the range, right at the time the boy needs a woman worst. Why——Oh, hell, Verne. If I didn't just naturally love Obe Carter for his good traits, I'd shoot him for bein' a damn fool."

Two cigarettes glowed for a long time in the darkness. At last Verne spoke and there was a strange hum in his usually firm tones.

"I reck'n I get you, Gregg," he said, "and I reck'n I understand how you feel about it. I'm not fit to speak to a woman like that. Anyway, we'll ride by daylight. If you see her again, tell her if there's anything I can do to help pull the O I C out and to save her any more trouble, I'll do it as long as I can ride."

The two men gripped hands in the darkness and walked back to the bunk-shack. Nothing more was said.

Joe Peel and Dave Stoak sat their horses half a mile from the Double Springs ranch, about the time Verne and old Gregg were talking. They, too, were talking about the O I C.

"Well, what's the word?" asked Peel.

"Plenty," growled Dave. "Hep and them done what you told 'em to do, but they done it too good." Dave went on to tell what had happened on West Fork, just as Hep Rogers had told it to him. Peel let out a long low whistle.

"That was rough," he said. "Did Hep say the boy was killed?"

"That's what he said, and there's something I know that you don't know. Obe Carter worships that boy, and he'll be on the prod."

"That's pretty bad," said Peel, "but you can't gamble for big stakes and not lose a pot once in a while. Obe Carter has rode the Twin Rivers country too hard, and now he is going to pay. That boy was the first payment, and he'll make plenty more."

"Mebbe so," said Dave, "but he's apt to collect some, too."

"Not much. Obe Carter is through in the Twin Rivers country. He hasn't got any friends, and a man can't get anywhere without friends. All Carter has is about twenty old hands that have bedded in his corral too long. Just a bunch of blind cripples."

"Somebody in that outfit ain't crippled," growled Dave.

"Hep said while they thought they was safe in the thicket, and mixin' it with Obe and the kid, some feller stormed right into 'em, killed Pat Weaver, and put a pet on Bud Kelso's arm. I asked Hep who it was, and he said how the hell did he know. Said the fellow was makin' so much smoke nobody could see him."

"Well, he's likely to be seen, and seen good, before this mess is over. We didn't get the start I wanted, but we'll have to work from it. Too bad about the kid, but he was in a man's place, and——"

"Obe ain't apt to see it that way, I tell you," said Dave.

"Maybe not, but it can't be helped now. I meant to work slow and take it easy, but this makes it different. We've got to strike hard, and work fast. The O I C outfit will go over and take the Diamond D apart to-morrow, then we'll clean the east side of Carter's range. I've got a fake sale of the Circle H G steers already made, but they ain't counted. There'll be a thousand more of them by to-morrow night. You ride for Pot Hole, and tell Boatwright to be on the East Fork at daylight, with all the men he's got."

CHAPTER IX

A STORY IN CLAY

At daylight next morning, the O I C cowboys were mounted and ready to ride. Carter called to two of his best men, and said:

"Ben, I'm goin' to take the boys over and call that Diamond D outfit all to pieces. I want you and Keezy on upper East Fork. Nothing wrong over there that I know of, but we got to keep all our eyes open. There's always a gang of rustlers at them Pot Hole cabins back in the roughs. Grass is comin' and they're apt to go to work any time."

That was all. Ben and Keezy mounted and struck north-east from the O I C. Carter led the rest of the men due west. As they rode along, Verne was in a deep study, paying no attention to the quips and raillery of Concho and the sharp thrusts of Rile. At last, Verne pulled up by Rile and said:

"Can you tell a rustler when you see one?"

"Shore I can, if he ain't in the brush and running, like them fellows were yesterday. Any time you see a gent that always carries one of them little stubby carbines on his saddle, he's either a rustler or he's hunting rustlers."

"That's just what I was thinking about," said Verne. "I've hunted rustlers some, and I've seen sports I like better. There's not a rifle in this outfit. If we jump a gang of rustlers—they are all killers—all they have to do is keep just out of six-shooter range and just in rifle range, and they can ruin us."

"You're talkin' natural, Verne," put in Concho. "The kind of rustlers that grow in this country may be satisfied with six-guns, but the real thing packs rifles and knows how to use 'em. The only way we could fight that kind would be to ride on to 'em and we might hurt ourselves doin' it."

Carter led on to West Fork and crossed the stream just where Hep Rogers and his men had driven the cattle across the day before. They stopped a little way from Tommy's dead horse, and Carter said:

"Now, boys, it's dangerous country from here on. I'll lead. I don't ask no man to go where I won't go myself. We'll stay together and Hep and his little gang ain't likely to jump us. I ain't on a killin' trip if I can help it. I just want to get any of my stuff that's on the Diamond D range, and I want to tell Hep the law, and what's goin' to happen next time I see any of his gang choosin' cattle on my range. Come on."

The Diamond D cabins were a mile, west of the stream. The way lay across uneven ground, with clumps of stunted trees here and there and thickets of bush and scrub cedar. The kind of range that a real cowman wouldn't have.

On they rode. Here and there they saw a Diamond D cow. Not a single O I C cow did they see. At last they came out in the open a hundred yards from the cabins. Five saddle horses stood in a group near the pens, and there was a carbine on each saddle.

"There's the sign," said Rile.

"I see it," replied Verne. "Look out."

Five men, who had been squatting on the ground by the fence, stood up, took a step towards their horses, and stopped. By that time the O I C riders were within fifty yards of them and coming steadily on.

There were twenty-two in the outfit, including Carter. Too many for five men to jump, even if they did have rifles.

Hep Rogers was an undersized runt, with red hair and short, pointed red whiskers. His gimlet eyes were blue-green and set close against a sharp, high-bridged nose. As Carter and his men pulled up, Hep stepped forward, breezily, as if nothing had happened, and in the most neighbourly tone he could command, called:

"Hi, gents. Light and let yo' saddles rest."

"We don't want to light," said Carter, bluntly. "I came over here to have a showdown about that mess yesterday."

"Why, Mr. Carter," whined Hep. "That was just a mistake and a plumb awful bad one. The boys and me had rounded up some cows on yo' side. We had just cut the Diamond D's and was pushin' 'em across when you and the boy come stormin' across after us. You jerked yo' gun as you cleared the creek, and one of the boys shoots high to stop you, so's we could explain. Then you and the boy opens on us, and——"

"Yes, you was shootin' a little high," said Obe Carter, grimly. "One of the bullets went through Tommy's hat, and another one took the top of his horse's head off."

"I tell you, it was all a mistake, Mr. Carter, and a plumb bad one. Some of yo' outfit shot Pat Weaver clean loose from the earth and put a pet on Bud Kelso's arm in the mess." Bud Kelso, with his arm in a sling, stood scowling at the O I C riders.

"Now, you listen to me just one minute, Hep," said old Obe, boring into the cringing little thief with his hard, grey eyes. "You're makin' light of that mess, and callin' it a mistake and all that. I'm goin' to tell you and tell you straight. In the first place, I know you're a dirty thief and a liar." Hep went pale, squirmed, and moved his hand towards his gun. "Draw it, damn you," snarled Obe Carter. "I wish you would. It would sure save a rope. Here's the law. The next time I catch you, or any of your outfit, on my range, there'll be a hangin'."

"Hold on, Mr. Carter," whined Hep. "You're gettin' plumb rough. We got a right to ride open range and drive Diamond D cows anywhere we find 'em, and that's all we done."

"Maybe you have, but I'm the law on my own range, and I've told you. If I catch you there again, it'll be a worse mistake than the one you made yesterday."

"You can talk to me thataway, Obe Carter, with a plumb army of killers at yo' back," flared Hep, his face going red. "You've always run over every little outfit that tried to run cows in the Twin Rivers country. You don't know the difference between thieves, nesters, and honest little cow fellers that's tryin' to get along. You——"

"Hold the deal," snapped Carter. "Every rustler that I ever hung put up that same tale. I think somebody with more brains than you've got must have fixed it up and passed it out among you. I didn't come here to argue. I came to tell you the law, and I've told it. I'm going to ride your range now and put all the O I C stuff back across the river. When I round up my range, if there's any Diamond D's over there, I'll send 'em to you."

"Just a minute, Mr. Carter," said Hep, in a pleading tone. "They ain't no call for you and me to have trouble, when we could just as easy be neighbours and friends. I and my boys will ride our range with you. If there's ary O I C on it, somebody else drove it there since yesterday. I done told my boys that you was always suspicious and I didn't want nothin' did that would make you think our'n weren't a straight outfit."

"Never mind riding with us," said Carter. "We know the range. If I find a burned O I C, or a fresh-branded calf with my ear-mark cut out, you fellows had better either be gone from here or have yo' necks greased when I come back."

Carter turned abruptly and rode away with his men. Hep Rogers and his followers made no move, but Hep said in a low tone:

"That's one more thing ag'in' Obe Carter when my time comes."

"I don't see why somebody ain't kilt the old devil before now," said Bud Kelso.

"Because nobody ain't had the nerve to jump an army," snarled Hep. "Why didn't you kill him just now? You had as good a chance as anybody ever gets."

"My arm's sorty sore," grinned Bud.

"Yes, and you'll be sore in the neck if somebody don't stop that old hellion from ridin' the Twin Rivers country

with spurs. I taken that off'n him because Joe Peel said he was to take all he offered and like it. But I ain't apt to forget that little speech, and when the time do come——"

Verne turned to Rile as they rode away. "Four of those horses had just been saddled," he said. "The other one had just been ridden plenty far and plenty fast."

"Yes," drawled Rile, "and that tall, skinny blue-eyed chap was the only one in the outfit that's had his pants in a saddle this morning. He's brought news from somewhere, *pronto*."

The fact was that Slim Kelly had brought word to Rogers to hold Carter and his men on the Diamond D range as long as possible, and then when night came to hit the upper trail for the Pot Hole cabins, with all the men he had.

Carter and his men rode the Diamond D range until well afternoon. Not an O I C brand could they find. They dropped back to their own range, scattered, and worked on towards the ranch. Obe Carter made no comment. He was clearly puzzled and disappointed. The three mounted tramps had drawn up on a bit of high ground a mile or more from the O I C and stopped to look around them.

"The old man shore knows how to tell 'em," said Concho, "and he don't stutter none."

"Yes," said Verne. "What he says sounds like he had practised it about as much as the rustlers have practised their little piece. Telling it to 'em don't do any good. It just makes 'em worse. Carter has already talked a lot too much. The only way to handle a rustler is to get the goods on him, and then do the work."

"That's sense," drawled Rile, "but I don't think Mr. Carter is likely to ask us for advice, or take it if we gave it to him. Our only remedy is this: if we find that his mode of procedure in such matters is unethical, we can just quit the job."

Verne sensed that Rile was making fun of him, and he stiffened his long legs in his stirrups.

"Boys, you don't know me any better than I know you. Obe Carter is in the middle of a jam and don't know how to get out of it. Lightning is going to strike him and he won't even know where it comes from. That gimlet-eyed skunk at the Diamond D is no more the brains of the thieves in the Twin Rivers country than I am. Somebody told him to let Obe Carter curse him all he wanted to, and Rogers done just that,

Why would he? There's just one answer. To keep him on the Diamond D range as long as he would stay."

"Verne," said Concho, "you talk like you had plumb good sense. Better tell that to the old man."

"It wouldn't do any good now," said Verne, "and anyway he wouldn't listen. He's the kind of man that has to be shown. Come on. Let's get to the ranch the quickest way we can ride."

Verne drove in his spurs and was leading the other two tramps by a hundred yards as they galloped on towards the O I C. They slowed down just before they reached the ranch, and Rile said to Concho:

"Something tells me, son, that this Verne fellow is a bit of a fox. Something has got hold of him that we didn't see grab him. First, he says he won't quit the O I C, and then he goes to doping things out like it was his own outfit. Look yonder. The whole outfit's in a huddle at the pens, and Verne's rid right into the middle of it."

Rile and Concho found that the huddle was around two horses that had been running until their sides heaved. The reins of both bridles were broken off at the bits, and a stirrup was gone from one of the saddles.

"Shore, them's Ben's and Keezy's mounts," Obe Carter was saying, "but dam'fi understand how——"

One of the horses was a stocking-footed sorrel, and Verne was looking at its feet. He interrupted Carter with:

"Where is any paint clay on this range? I haven't seen any."

"Why, away up East Fork there's a sort of shallow pond, mostly dry, that's got paint clay in it," said Carter.

"Can you lead us to it, Gregg?" snapped Verne. "Ben and Keezy are on the other side of that pond, and not far from it."

"Shore I can lead you to it," said Gregg, "but it's ten miles from here."

"I don't care if it's fifty miles. Them boys are out there, dead or crippled."

"Go ahead, Gregg," said Carter. "I reck'n the four of you will be enough." Carter was looking at the horse's white feet now. The white feet were dyed red, almost to where the sorrel hair set in. Then he saw something else. It was a bullet, lodged in the tree of Ben's saddle, on the left side and just below the horn. Then old Obe Carter came

awake. He sprang for his saddle, and called: "Half of you stay here, and the rest come with me. Hell's broke loose somewhere. Them boys will ride right into it."

Carter and his men tore into the trail, but Verne and the three with him were gone. They were riding as men had never ridden on that range before.

When Carter and his men reached the pond, after a ten-mile run, they saw the four men on the other side and rode around to where they were. Verne and his companions were on the ground, standing in a group. Before them lay the body of Ben, and a little way from it, that of Keezy.

"Now, what in the roarin' blazes of hell do you suppose has happened?" demanded Carter, as he pulled his heaving horse to a stop.

"Pretty easy to see," replied Verne calmly. "Somebody has killed these fellows, and there were plenty in the gang. A dozen bullets hit each one of 'em. Did you notice any beef steers as you came up the valley?"

"Beef steers?" asked Carter, with a puzzled expression. "I wasn't lookin' for beef steers, but—— Come to think of it, I didn't. Hell, Verne. You don't mean——"

"Looks like it," said Verne. "Let's scout around and see if we can hit a trail."

Half an hour later, with the sun almost down, Carter and his men stopped a mile farther up the stream. They had found where several hundred, maybe a thousand, cattle had crossed to the east side and headed north. Carter was a raving madman. Not only had somebody taken his cattle, but he had been tricked into going to the Diamond D and giving the rustlers a free hand on the east side of his range. Obe Carter didn't like to lose cattle, and above all he was raging because he had not seen through the ruse.

"Two of you boys go back and get Ben and Keezy," he ordered. "Put them on one of your horses and you ride the other one. Then when you get back to the ranch, tell the other boys to trail us. We'll hang that gang right now. Come on, boys."

"Just a minute, Mr. Carter," said Verne. "Think that over a bit. There are only nine of us, and there may be——"

"I don't give a damn, I'd foller 'em if I was by myself."

"Yes, and get killed."

"Who the hell's running this outfit, anyway?" roared Carter. "You or me?"

"You are, of course, but you can't run me and my friends into a trap, and get us killed, when it won't do any good. I'll go as far for the O I C as any man on it, but I mean to use my head."

"What's the matter with you, Verne?" asked Carter. "Are you tryin' to help them damned rustlers get clean away?"

Verne's brown eyes narrowed to black points, and his voice fairly hummed as he said in a low, cold tone:

"Mr. Carter, you are crazy mad, and I don't believe you mean that. Any man that accuses me of standing in with a thief is going to have to do some mighty fancy gun work, and do it quick."

"Why—I—of course I didn't mean you was a rustler," stammered Carter, "but what's the matter with you?"

"Nothing's the matter with me," snapped Verne. "The trouble is with you. You don't savvy what you are up against. You don't understand yet that all the thieves in the country have ganged on you. Didn't you see those saddle guns at the Diamond D? Don't you know what that means? Do you want to take nine men, with six-shooters, against maybe fifty who have rifles and are expecting you? I'll go anywhere on earth you'll go, but let's be sane about it. You want to protect your stuff, of course, but you can't do it by getting yourself and half your little bunch of men killed. You'll need all of us before you get out of this mess."

Old Obe Carter was a crazy hothead, but he was fair. He rode up to Verne, and extended his hand.

"I take back what I said, Verne, and apologize. I do go crazy when somebody drives my cows. You're right. There may be too many of 'em for us, but—they'll get clean away with them steers. Around a thousand at a drag. I can't stand that."

"You don't have to stand it," declared Verne. "We can ride farther in one day than they can drive those cattle in three. Let's go get ready, then go after 'em."

"Get—get ready? What do you mean?"

"Get all the men we've got left. Get fresh horses that have not been rode limber. Get some saddle guns that'll reach as far as theirs do, and plenty of ammunition. Then go into the fight, and win it."

"Looks like you're right," said Carter, doubtfully, "but

I shore hate to quit a hot trail like this. Come on. Let's get them boys and head for the ranch before dark."

CHAPTER X

Tools of War

It was well into the night when they reached the O I C. Verne called old man Carter aside and said:

"Mr. Carter, I don't mean to talk out of my turn in this mess, but it is bigger than you thought it was. If you haven't got guns, let me take Rile and Concho, and get some at Horcado."

"I reck'n there's a dozen here," said Carter. "We'll count 'em and see. Then you fellows can get enough for everybody to have one and plenty of cartridges for 'em, but— I talk straight from the shoulder, Verne. You and Rile were both rotten drunk, and Concho wasn't none too sober, when you came to the O I C. I can't afford right now——"

"Don't worry, about that, Mr. Carter. We've got too much sense to get drunk in Horcado, after what happened at the Diamond D to-day."

"All right, I'll gamble on you once."

Examination of the private arsenal developed the fact that Carter and all his old hands had saddle guns but no ammunition. So only the three mounted tramps needed guns, and all needed ammunition.

"Here's the money," said Carter, when they were ready to go. "Carl Bussey sleeps in the back of his store. He won't know you, and won't want to charge anything." They mounted and rode away.

"Gregg," Carter said to the old puncher, "I can't make them three fellows out. They're a plumb puzzle to me. I don't understand why they didn't hit the trail after that mess yesterday. Nobody could blame 'em if they had. Concho, of course, is just a common saddle-drifter, but the other two ain't. Take that fellow Verne—Now, what's the matter?"

Verne had turned back. He rode up and stopped.

"We've been so busy to-day that I forgot to ask about Tommy's leg," he said. "How is it?"

"Swollen about twice its size," grunted Carter, "but he don't seem to have no fever."

"Thank you, sir," said Verne, and was gone.

"Now, there you are," said Carter. "He acts like a human, looks like a boy, talks like a man, and fights like hell, but—— Oh, well, I'm gambling on 'em. If they pull out, I lose the money and some horses. If they come back, with a chance like that to get away and money to go on, they'll be worth keepin' as long they'll stay."

"You ain't gamblin', you're playin' a cinch. The other two will jump through the hoop for Verne, and he'll bring 'em back. You can tie to that fellow."

"Yo' judgment of men is pretty good, Gregg, but somehow——"

"I ain't bankin' on my judgment so much," said Gregg, "as—as—I'm just sorty backin' a hunch."

Carter shot the old puncher an odd glance, and they went on to the house. Gregg wanted to take a look at Tommy's leg.

Carl Bussey had gone to bed, but was not asleep, when Verne knocked on the door. Bussey got up and opened it, then he looked at the three men who had come into the store. None of them looked very pleasant.

"We ride for the O I C," said Verne, "and we want to get some things."

"Got an order?"

"No, sir, we'll pay cash, and we're in a hurry. Sorry to disturb you, but we couldn't come in the daytime."

"Huh. Obe Carter don't let nobody loaf in the daytime . . . Three saddle guns. Here they are and scabbards with 'em . . . Obe keeps his men on the move, he does . . . What! Two thousand cartridges? That's a hundred apiece for twenty men. Must be goin' to war. They cuss old Obe for a close-fisted slave-driver, but he keeps what belongs to him, and pays for what he gets. Them boots? Sixteen dollars, and good as shop made, if they fit you."

Carl Bussey was still talking and frowning at Verne's discarded shoes and puttees when the three mounted tramps left the store. Out in the shadows, where they had left their horses, they quickly and deftly buckled the saddle scabbards in place and put the carbines in them.

"All set to go?" asked Concho.

"Not yet," replied Verne. "I might take a notion to buy this old town, and I want to see how it looks at night. We're goin to look in on the King Pin and maybe some more

places. Now, listen, I've got all the money in the crowd, and it's just enough to pay for two rounds of drinks. We're not going to take any more, even if somebody offers 'em to us."

"I got you," said Rile. "Whisky and some kinds of business don't mix."

They went first to the King Pin. Val Thorpe was behind the bar, and no one else was in the place. Verne threw the exact change on the bar, and then as he set his empty glass down, he leaned his long body across the bar.

"Say, Val, you're a friend to old man Obe, ain't you?"

"Yes," laughed Val, "but I ain't chargin' no drinks to none of his punchers that I don't know no better than I know you fellows. Friendship is friendship, and business is something else."

"Business is what I'm talking," said Verne, his voice gone hard and flat. "If you are Obe Carter's friend, you'll tell him what he ought to know. If you're not his friend, he ought to know that, too, for he's going to need some, *pronto*. What have you heard about a run-in between the O I C and the Diamond D yesterday?"

"Plenty, and about the one they had to-day, too. I've heard a thousand times all about how Obe Carter don't know the difference between a little rancher that's honest and tryin' to make out, and a nester, or rustler."

"Yes," smiled Verne, "I heard Hep Rogers speak that little piece to-day."

"Too damn bad about old Obe's boy," said Val. "Course, Obe had no business takin' a kid into a mess like that, but it's bad. Be hard on Obe's daughter, and she's a fine girl, too."

"Yes, that's all true," said Verne, "but I want some dope on this mess. Who's the brains of the gang that's ridin' the O I C?"

"What are you trying to do? Get me into a jam with all the nesters and long-loop riders in the Twin Rivers country?"

"No," said Verne, his brown eyes narrowing until they went black. "I'm going to give you a chance to show whether you are Obe Carter's friend or not."

"Oh, you are?"

"Yes, I am. The O I C is in a bad jam. Old man Obe thinks Hep Rogers is the pin of the outfit that's ridin' him. Hep ain't got sense enough to do anything but run a brand and

repeat a lie that's taught him. He couldn't tell one on his own account. Who's the wise bird that rods these rustlers?"

"Huh. I'm Obe Carter's friend, and I'd tell him anything I know, but I don't tell nobody what I guess. I might guess wrong."

"I see. How many of the Diamond D outfit have been in town to-night?"

"Several."

"Which way did they go?"

"Ain't gone that I know of. If you've lost 'em, you might find 'em at the Silver Spur."

"I get you," said Verne, and the three went out.

"If them three gents is on the level with Obe Carter, he's got him an army," mused Val. "I hope they confine the part of the war that happens in Horcado to the Silver Spur. Cleaning up after gun messes ain't as light work as I like."

CHAPTER XI

Three Against Six

"We are all soused to the ears," whispered Berne, as they entered the Spur and saw five men lined up at the bar; Bud Kelso, with his arm in a sling, Dave Stoak, Slim Kelly, and two others.

"Shore," giggled Concho. "Roped two tigers and a lion, at jus' one throw, an' got ef—eflunt by the foot, but he got away. Yee-eep."

They all reached the bar, as fine an assortment of plain and fancy drunks as the Silver Spur had ever known, and it had known many. Concho was hilariously drunk, and talking like a fluttermill. Verne was thick-tongued and grinning, while Rile was just plain, glassy-eyed drunk.

The bartender in the Silver Spur was Nick Speed. Nick was a deformed giant, with a belly like a barrel, a head like a wart, and no neck at all. His ears flopped, he had a rat mouth, and his two little black eyes looked like shoe-buttons fastened to the sides of a hooked nose that covered most of his face.

Nick was standing with his hands on the copper gutter at the back of the bar, and they were six feet apart, looking like two faded hams. One glance at Nick was enough to advise

the world that the Silver Spur was a tough joint. He merely looked at the three drunks as if they had been flies on the bar, without the customary greeting of "What'll it be, gents?"

Verne grinned vacuously as he laid some small silver on the bar, and said:

"Hic—— There she is, pardner. Lash we got. I—hic—dropped the resh in my boot, and can't get me boot off. Bone immi foot," and he tried to laugh at his joke and fell against the bar.

"What you want?" snarled Nick, his mouth turning to a crooked gash on his face.

"Strai' whisky," hiccoughed Verne. "Cain'—cain't mix 'em, y' know. Mi' get drunk," Verne giggled.

Nick snapped three glasses and a bottle of forty-rod on the bar. They poured drinks. He set the bottle on the back bar, raked in the money, and returned to the other five men, placing his hands in their six-foot stance and awaiting orders.

The three mounted tramps forgot their liquor for the time. Concho was gabbling varied versions of his tale of roping a menagerie, on the side of Rile towards the door. Verne, on the side of the tall puncher next the five men, was trying to crack a garbled joke, and laughing immoderately. Rile stood bolt upright between them, with his glassy stare fixed on the mirror, as if he wondered who those people were on the other side of it. Finally, Bud Kelso edged over towards Verne, and said:

"Looks like you boys got a party on."

"Yes," slobbered Verne. "'Manch—'manch'-patin' party."

"What?" grinned Bud. "Emancipation party?" Did you get out of jail?"

"Nope. It's thish-way. Don't tell nobody, but we broke out, 'scaped, I mean, from O I C ou'fit. Hic—— Too many lanterns and not enough beds. That's the trouble 'ith O I C."

"Why, I seen you three fellows with Obe Carter at the Diamond D this morning."

"Yesh. Maybe so. We—we went to Di' D once. Seems like lash week, maybe." Verne tried to spit, failed, rubbed his hand over his face, and reached for his glass of whisky.

Rile was still staring at the mirror. Concho broke out in a new version of his story.

"Sho' thing you know, fel'rs. Roped two eflunts and a tiger at jus' one throw. Got bo' 'strictor by foot, an'—— Oh, hell tha's wrong. Snake ain't got feet. Got tiger by foot, but he got away. Stra' goods, boys. How's th' for long-loop? Yee-ee-eep!"

"Them's the fellows, all right," said Bud Kelso in a low tone when he returned to his companions. "They have just quit the O I C and are all pie-eyed."

Just then a giant puncher entered the saloon, glanced at the three drunks, and passed on to where the other five stood.

"Hallo, here's old Mont Keeler," they greeted in chorus. "What's the word, boy?"

"Where's Joe Peel?" growled Mont.

"Mr. Peel is out of town," said Dave Stoak. "He went over across the line to look at some steers."

"Like hell he has. Well, it ain't so far across the line that I can't go upstairs and tell him about them steers. Us Pot Hole boys pulled an awful drag of 'em across East Fork to-day, and they got to have the Circle H G run on 'em."

"Shut up, fool," warned Bud, and jerked his head towards the three drunks.

"Them fellers don't count," said Mont. "They don't know they're alive. Where's Hep? We sent Slim over this morning to tell him to bring some men to help run them brands. 'Stead of anybody comin', Slim don't come back. Here he is, runnin' up his temperature and gettin' ready to go up the west horn of Horcado and spend the night at some dance hall, I reck'n. Hell of an outfit. Got a drag of beef worth a million dollars and too damned ornery to take care of it. If I can't see Joe Peel, I want you to tell him——"

"Wait a minute, Mont," pleaded Stoak. Then he turned to Speed. "Put them drunks out of here, Nick."

"Shore," croaked Nick. He sidled along the bar like a giant crab, and with his hairy paws still six feet apart, leaned over and said: "Here, you soaks. Lap that stuff up and get out of here. You're drunk."

"Why, my dear, dear sir," said Rile. "You surely can't mean that. We have paid for our drinks and the evening's entertainment has jus' shart—I mean started."

A glance shot from Verne to Rile and was relayed on to Concho. Nick hunched up his shoulders and shot his head forward.

"Yes, I mean it, and what I say goes in here. See? Lap it up and git."

Nick made a serious mistake when he leaned forward over that bar. In some way he hit the barrel and cylinder of Rile's gun with his wart-like head, and went down behind the bar like a sack of salt that had fallen off a wagon. The three drunks had swung out in a row from the bar, with plenty of gun room, facing the six rustlers. They had all dropped their hands to their guns, then stopped.

"Here, you fellers," said Mont. "Don't try to start nothin' in here."

It's already started," snapped Verne, who had got strangely sober in a second. "You have spilled the beans. Go ahead and draw, you rummy, long-loop riders."

The rustlers were six mean gunners, and knew it. They also knew they had been tricked by three saddle tramps who were playing drunk. With all the advantage on their side, they went to battle gladly. Their guns cleared the holsters, but that was all.

Rile and Concho had been in a thousand saloon brawls and other gunfights. Verne was the swiftest fancy gunner the Wild West shows ever knew, and they were all rearing to go. Never was so much lead poured out of three guns in so short a time in that battle-scarred old saloon. It simply swept the outlaws down like a flood. Not only were the six men down, but when the three mounted tramps backed out the front door there was not a light in the place.

They gained their horses, mounted, and rode to the back door of the King Pin, which was still open. Verne dismounted and went in.

"Hallo," said Val. "What's the ruckus down at the Spur?"

"We found the brains of this rustler gang," replied Verne. "I came to tell you who it is, so you won't have to guess any more. His name is Joe Peel."

"That was my guess," said Val, without changing a feature. "What did you do with them brains, fry 'em?"

"No, we didn't see him."

"Well, you made one hell of a mistake. He'll see you some time—or have you saw."

"Maybe so," said Verne. "If he does, I'd like to see him and know him. What kind of looking fellow in this Joe Peel?"

"Him? Why, he's right good lookin' in his way. I never could tell whether he's an Englishman, or a dang fool American trying to act like an Englishman. He's around forty-five, I reck'n. Black hair and eyes, and black whiskers. It's them damn' whiskers I don't like. He keeps 'em cut short on the sides and pointed on his chin. Then he wears his hair long on top and lets it hang to one side. Whatever he is, he is also a cowhand.

"He rides 'em as they come, and he slings a gun right sudden. He's been on the Double Springs a couple of years, I reck'n. Got it leased, and don't run nothin' but steers. He don't never drink. I don't know him intimate, but that's the best picture of him I can give you—just a uppity dang fool, what never asks nobody to do anything; just tells 'em to do it."

"I see," said Verne. "I reck'n I'd know him if I saw him, by what you said. I'd like to ask you some more questions, but I haven't got time now. Just wanted you to know that Joe Peel is the brains of that gang. If you are a friend to old man Carter, keep your eyes and ears open, and *watch Joe Peel*."

Verne was gone. Val Thorpe went to the back door and saw the three mounted tramps disappear into the chaparral a hundred feet from the saloon. He listened until they were out of hearing, and then he muttered to himself:

"I'll bet you birds four hundred dollars that you've started the damnedest mess that was ever in the Twin Rivers country. I'll double that bet that you drag me into it before it's over."

Val turned and went back into the King Pin and began to close up. He knew his range wars. When one swept the country, everybody either got into the mess, or out of the country.

Joe Peel and Andy Antrell, the owner of the Silver Spur and partner of Peel, had been upstairs over the saloon during the fight. It was a favourite dodge of Peel's, when he wanted his skirts clear of some crime, to hide in that room for a week or two, while his henchmen gave out the news that he had gone to another State to look at a herd of steers.

Peel and Antrell ran down into the saloon as soon as the noise stopped. At the foot of the steps they stopped and stared into the darkness.

"Nick," called Antrell. "Nick, where the devil are you?"

There was no answer, but a man groaned somewhere on the floor. Antrell made a light, then closed and barred the front door. The place was a mess. Nick was still very much out, behind his bar. Slim, Mont, and two others had got more lead than they could carry, and lay on the floor very dead. Dave Stoak was shot through the body and unconscious. Bud Kelso was bleeding from two wounds but roused enough to tell what had happened. Joe Peel kicked the dead body of Mont, and said:

"That's what happens to anybody when he talks too much with his mouth. Here we are, with more work than we can handle and six men shot in one brawl, all because a fool talked too much."

"Yes," said Antrell, "and them fellows will pack the news to the O I C. What you aim to do, Joe?"

"Just what I set out to do—trim the O I C to a milk bunch, but I'll have to do it in the open now. The trap's already set for Obe Carter and his outfit. They'll head for the Pot Hole in the morning. There's enough men there to eat 'em. But I've got to get to the Double Springs and send somebody to warn Lacey Boatwright. He's the king pin up there now. Get me a horse, Andy."

Peel had been gone some time before Antrell succeeded in waking Nick from his nap and set about cleaning up the mess, getting the two wounded cared for, taking away the dead, and cleaning house. Horcado was a tough town, but things often happened in the Silver Spur that Antrell didn't want even Horcado to know too much about, and this was one of them.

CHAPTER XII

Branding Fires Burn

Just before the three mounted tramps reached the O I C, Verne pulled up and said:

"Boys, we'd better forget what happened in town tonight. If old man Obe finds out, let somebody else tell him. I promised him we wouldn't get drunk, and he might not like it. If it ever has to be told, I'll tell it."

"All right, Verne," said Rile. "Now, I'll speak a piece. We are going to be three of the worst-wanted saddle-

tramps that ever drifted the cow country, and the men that are going to want us are not nice. It's the rope for us, if ever that long-loop outfit gets its hands on us. You've shown me that there's something under your hat besides hair and bone. From here on you lead these triplets, and I'll follow you any place you say to go."

"That's right," chimbed in Concho. "Let Verne lead, you foller him, and I'll foller you and tail the outfit. Let's go."

They went on to the O I C, slipped into the bunk-house, and went to bed to get what sleep they could before Obe Carter roused them.

While they were waiting for breakfast next morning, Verne got hold of old Gregg.

"Gregg," he said, "I don't know this country well. Can you make me a sort of map of the place where those cattle would go after they crossed East Fork?"

"Yes," grunted Gregg, picking up a pencil and a piece of paper from the table. "Here's the O I C. Here's East Fork. Here, east of East Fork and almost due east from the O I C, is the old Double Springs ranch. It's a steer ranch now, and belongs to Joe Peel."

Rile and Concho were looking over Gregg's shoulder. None of the three tramps said a word or made a sign, and Gregg went on: "Here's where them cattle crossed East Fork. It's about the north line of the Double Springs range. Layin' north of the Double Springs range in the foothills and some rough country, is what's called the Pot Hole country."

"What's that circle you made there?" asked Verne.

"That's the Pot Hole valley. Just a little prairie in the foothills. I got an idea that's where them cattle bedded last night."

"Very likely," said Verne. "Thank you, Gregg. I get the lay of the country from that. Now, there's one more favour I want to ask. Here's some medicine I got for Tommy. Directions are on the bottles and boxes. Will you take it to the house?"

Gregg said he would and went off to the ranch-house with the package. It was barely daylight, but breakfast was over and the men were saddling up, when Carter called Verne aside.

"Tommy's got a pretty bad leg on him," said old Obe, with a queer catch in his voice. "He's raising all sorts of Cain

to see you, and I—I hate to disappoint him. He's took a liking to you, and—— We're goin' into this mess, and you——We might not all come back. Go in and see him a minute, please. We'll ride on, and you can ketch us."

That was the last thing on earth that Verne wanted to do just then, but there was no way out of it. Old Obe had not ordered him to do it, but had asked him decently and that was a concession for Obe Carter to make to any of his men. They all mounted, and while the others took the trail, Verne trotted up to the yard gate, dismounted and went in. Bessie Carter met him at the door.

"Come in, Mr. Verne," she said, after greeting him. "Tommy is expecting you. He said he knew you would come if he sent for you."

He followed her on into the big room where Tommy lay on the bed, his face pale and his eyes unnaturally large.

"Hallo, Verne," piped Tommy.

"Hallo, old-timer," returned Verne. "How's that busted leg this morning?"

"Gosh, it's lots better, Verne. Sis gimme some of them white tablets, and then she rubbed it with some of that smooth cool stuff, and it don't hurt hardly none now."

"That's fine," said Verne, looking at the injured limb. "You'll be out and riding 'em again before you know it now."

"I shore hope so. Sis told me——"

"Tommy," said Bess, "you are not supposed to tell what others tell you."

"It's all right to tell this," declared Tommy. "Sis told me——"

"Tommy!" Bess was gesturing frantically behind Verne's back, while he still bent over the bed.

"Well, you did," blurted Tommy. "You told me I ought to thank Verne for that medicine and and all. And I shore thank you, too, Verne. That old leg was hurtin' like anything before Bess gave me the medicine."

"Fine. Glad I thought of that medicine. It's the kind I used one time when I had a busted leg. Stay with it, and it'll cure you in no time. I've got to go now. Keep quiet and snooze all you can. When we he-men get hurt, we don't have to be nursed like babies." Verne gripped the slender little hand and turned from the room.

Bess Carter walked with him out on to the gallery.

"Mr.—Mr. Verne——" she began.

"Just leave off the 'Mister,' please, ma'am," Verne said. "I'm just a cowhand, and it sounds kinda funny."

"Well, Verne, then. Father didn't tell me where he was going with the men, but old Gregg told me. I—I think this is the beginning of the end for the O I C. If the nesters and the rustlers and the little ranchers all gang on us—father hasn't got any men. He can't hold out against—against the whole world. I hate to see father broken, after all these years of being king here in the Twin Rivers country. Otherwise, I—I rather wish something would happen to take us away from here."

"Let's hope they won't break him," said Verne. "We may get those cattle back."

"Yes, you may. That's why I told Tommy to send—I mean that's what I wanted to talk to you about. When anybody drives father's cattle, he goes crazy mad and he'll rush into anything. Gregg—Gregg told me how calm and cool you were when trouble comes up. The rest of the men would never think of anything, except what father told them to do. Won't you try—try to keep father from rushing into trouble and maybe getting himself and his men killed just for a few cows?"

"I'll do anything on earth I can to protect the O I C and your father, Miss—Miss——"

"If I'm to call you Verne, why not leave off the 'Miss' and call me Bess?"

She was looking at him levelly with those big blue eyes, and Verne tingled inwardly.

"I—I was going to say," he stammered on, "that when these things come up, we have to go into 'em or just let rustlers and outlaws take the country. When the showdown comes, I'll do all I can."

"I'm sure you will," said Bess.

"I must be going, or I won't catch up," said Verne. "Good-bye."

"Good-bye and good luck," said Bess.

She watched him swing away towards his horse. She had not heard him call her name, either Bess or Bessie, in that soft, Texas drawl of his, as she had hoped to do. She watched him mount, then turned back into the lonesome old ranch-house to keep Tommy company another day. She sat down by the bed, and Tommy looked up at her. A tear was glistening on her smooth cheek, and the boy said:

"What are you cryin' about sis?"

"Oh, don't ask me that, Tommy. There are a thousand things that——"

"Don't you worry about them rustlers, sis. I'll bet Verne can whip a hundred of 'em by his lonesome. Ary man that——"

"Any man, Tommy," corrected Bess.

"Ary—I mean any—man that can break a bronc's neck with his two hands, can handle all the rustlers he can get to."

Bess didn't correct Tommy for saying "bronc." She said that herself and thought it was right. Anyway, there was a lump in her throat, and she didn't want to talk. There were also more tears coming, and she didn't want Tommy to see them, so she busied herself about the room and presently went out.

Verne was not a fool by any way of reasoning. He knew, in fact Bessie Carter had virtually admitted, that she had caused Tommy to send for him. He could understand this girl, there on the far-flung edge of the world, starving for the company of young people. Yes, young men, if you will. It was natural. Women were no novelty to Verne. He thought he had seen them all, until he looked into Bess Carter's eyes. He was skilled at reading eyes, and knew that hers were the eyes of an absolutely pure, guileless woman.

All these years, in the cow-towns, and wherever he had drifted about the world, Verne had been looking for just such a girl. One whose frank and level gaze was as pure as a flawless diamond. He had found her, in Bessie Carter, but had found her too late.

Fate had a queer way of shoving a fellow about, he thought. He was of good enough family—just plain ranch folks. He had led a singularly clean life out on the ranges, in his boyhood. Even after he began drifting he had been decent, except for drinking a little too much sometimes.

Why did he, after all that, have to lose his head and bust a gun over the head of a rotten lout, whose abuse was, after all, no more than the barking of a dog at his heels? Wanted for murder, and a price on his head, perhaps. Fate didn't play fair. Then the thought came to him that if fate had not played him that trick, in all probability he would never have seen Bess Carter, and those wonderful blue eyes.

"Hell of a world," he swore. "I—I can never have her, but I'll make it damned interesting for anybody that makes

trouble for her by pestering Tommy, old man Obe, or even the O I C cows."

Raging inwardly at the trap he was in, Verne drove in his spurs until the blood came, and his horse shot forward along the trail, to overtake the outfit within another mile.

At East Fork crossing where the cattle had been driven into the Pot Hole country, Obe Carter called a halt.

"Now, fellers," he said, "from here on, it's dangerous ground all the way. Them rustlers know we'll follow 'em, and they'll keep men along the trail to hinder us all they can. We——"

"Just a minute, Mr. Carter," said Verne. "Following those fellows looks to me like bad business. They'll do just what you say they'll do, and we'll ride right into their traps."

"Shore it's bad business," roared Carter. "The whole damned mess is bad business, but we've got to get them cattle and hang what we can ketch of the rustlers, or else just quit and leave the Twin Rivers country, and I'll be damned if I do that."

"Let's look at it another way," said Verne. "I'm pretty sure those cattle are on the Pot Hole prairie right now, and——"

"Pot Hole prairie?" sneered Carter. "Do you think them rustlers are crazy?"

"No, sir. I think they are the smartest, smoothest, most dangerous men you've ever had anything to do with. I think they are running the O I C brand into Circle H G right now in Pot Hole prairie."

"Hell, Verne, you're crazy. That's Joe Peel's steer brand."

"I can't help whose brand it is, it can be run right over the O I C brand and look like new, and I'll gamble it's happening right now. They'll be watching in the roughs this side of the Pot Hole. Ten men, with rifles, can lay in those roughs and pick us every one off before we can get to the herd."

"But what makes you think——"

"I don't think, I *know*. If anybody knows a way on up East Fork draws and around through the hills, so we can come up on the other side of them, let's take it. First thing we want is the cattle. When the fight starts, they are going to run. If we stampede them the other way into the roughs, we'll never get 'em."

"Yes, and if we stampede 'em back this way, half of 'em will break their necks."

"Some of them will," said Verne. "That's a chance we've got to take, whichever way they run, and you know they'll run when the shooting starts."

"Well, dammit, if you know they're burnin' 'em in Pot Hole prairie, that's the only thing we can do. Go around 'em and come at 'em from the other side. You know the country, Gregg. Lead out."

It took three long hours of scrambling over the winding, stony trail to gain a position beyond the Pot Hole prairie. During that three hours, there were many thoughts in Obe Carter's mind, but outstanding among them was his wonder how Verne knew the Circle H G brand was being run over his O I C—if he did know it.

They finally stopped on the north side of a hill, far up towards the peak. Carter and Verne dismounted, crept to the summit, and peered over. There was the Pot Hole prairie, spread out below them like a map. It was dotted with cattle. One herd was at the west end of the oblong glade, and another at the east end.

A rider would cut a steer out of the herd at the west. The animal would start for the other herd. Long-loop riders would swarm on to the steer. It would be roped, thrown tied, and turned over to the branders in a jiffy. Three branding fires were going, and the steers were always thrown in reach of one of them. No prettier job of open range branding was ever seen. Old Obe Carter let out a terrible oath.

"Them's my steers, and they're burnin' 'em. I don't know what they're puttin' on 'em, and I don't know who's doin' it, but by—— Come on, let's get at 'em."

"There's at least fifty men here," said Verne.

"I don't give a damn if there's a million," snapped Carter. "Come on. The longer we wait, the more they'll burn."

CHAPTER XIII

Battle of pot Hole Prairie

Old-timers in the Twin Rivers country still talk about the Battle of Pot Hole prairie, and indeed they well may. It was a major engagement in the worst range war that part of

the cow country ever knew. Old Bill Strothers says——But no matter. The only thing is, Bill was in it and Bill knows his cow-fights.

The probabilities are that Lacey Boatwright was the first of Peel's men to find out there was trouble. He knew it when he saw old Obe Carter storming towards him on the east side of the herd. Ten seconds later Lacey was dead, with half his head shot away.

Guns began to crash and the east herd ran back across the prairie, killing two branders before they could get out of the way. The trail to the O I C range ran out of the west end of the little prairie. The east herd catapulted into the west herd, and a thousand steers tried to take that trail at once. They spread out on each side of the trail and struck the brushy roughs with a mighty roar. Dead and crippled steers were left in every wash and gully, as that avalanche of beef swept on towards the home range, until their thunder died away in the distance.

Carter and his men had thoroughly surprised the outlaws, and in the confusion were having their own way. No questions were asked. The cattle were being burned, and any man who helped do it was a rustler and subject to be shot.

A dozen rustlers had been killed and not one of the O I C men had a scratch. The rustlers lay scattered all across the east end of the little prairie. The outlaws had disappeared from the earth. Carter stopped his men in a close group about a hundred yards from the north side of the prairie.

"Looks like we taken 'em to a plumb cleanin' that time," Carter said to Verne, who was sitting his horse by Carter's side. "Reck'n we'd better get on after them crazy cattle and shoot the cripples. We can't——" That was as far as he got.

There was a puff of smoke, far over to the south side of the prairie, fully four hundred yards away. Verne's horse dropped like a wet blanket. The whole top of its head was smashed.

About two hundred yards from where they stood, at the north edge of the prairie, was a little bare hill not much larger than a haystack and crowned with rough, jagged boulders.

"Get behind the hill quick," yelled Verne, dropping to the ground beside his dead horse.

As they turned and rode for the hill, smoke puffs showed again at the south side of the prairie. Cole and Hardy, two the best men in the O I C outfit, went from their saddles.

Carter and eight of his men gained the protection of that hill. Ten lay dead in the prairie, and Verne was still lying behind his dead horse.

Rile and Concho were with Carter. They peered over the hill once, and got a glimpse of Verne. He was evidently hit, for he was acting crazily. He was rolling towards where two dead outlaws and their horses lay, fifty yards farther from the hill than where his own horse had fallen.

Ten minutes went on. Bullet after bullet whined over their little refuge, or struck the rocks and screamed into the air again. They couldn't see Verne from where they were, but he was still out there.

"Them fellers has got longer-range guns than our'n," said Concho.

"Well, fellers," said old Obe, grimly. "I guess it's about over," and he pointed to where two groups of three men were riding in each direction from the central enemy force, to assault the little hill from the flank.

"Wait a minute," came Verne's voice from almost at the old man's feet. He was covered with blood and dirt, but he gripped two rifles in one arm, and two cartridge belts in the other. He had taken them from the dead outlaws and crawled through a hell of rifle fire with hem. "Here, Rile," he panted. "Take one of these and watch the west. I'll watch the east."

Old Rile grabbed the gun avidly. It was a long-barrelled 30-30.

"Soft nose bullets," he grunted, as he pulled the long cartridges from the belt and slipped them through the loading gate. "That'll stop 'em." He gauged his distance, adjusted the sights, and fired. The leader of the three men coming from the west pitched from his saddle, just as Verne's gun roared and one of the men on the east went down.

In an ordinary fight, that would have turned the others back, but the outlaws had to wipe that little band out. They had gone too far. There must never be an O I C man left to tell what had happened that day. So, they pushed on, and two more went down. Then the last man on each end turned to go back. Neither of them took two jumps.

"Some of your own medicine, damn you," growled Rile, as he replaced the three cartridges he had used.

Meantime, a dozen of the main body of outlaws advanced into the prairie to have it over with. They did. Verne

and Rile turned on them with their own long-range guns and soft nosed bullets. In a minute four were down, and the others were heading for the trail that went out the south side of the prairie.

Carter and his men regained enough of their own and outlaw horses to carry them and their dead. When the bodies were lashed to saddles, Carter said:

"I reck'n we better take a sort of roundabout trail. Some of them fellows are apt to lay for us on the main trail. We couldn't do nothin' with the cattle to-night nohow."

"Good Lord, man!" Verne broke out. "Don't you think of anything but cattle and rustlers? Let's get to the ranch the quickest way. Men like these will do anything, and your daughter and Tommy are there, with only the cook and the horse-wrangler to protect them."

"Why—why, that's right, Verne," said Carter. "I hadn't thought of that."

"I had," snapped Verne. "If you and the other boys will bring the bodies on, I'll take Rile and Concho and go to the ranch the quickest way possible."

"All right, go ahead," said Carter.

"There are a lot of horses in the world, boys," said Verne, as they struck the wrecked trail through the roughs, where the stampeding herd had been along. "If we kill these, we can get some more. Come on."

Hep Rogers and two of his men, Arizona Pete and Clay Seltzer, were with the ambush which had been laid on the Pot Hole trail for the O I C outfit, and which Verne had kept Carter out of. When the fight came up, Hep said to his men:

"There's hell again, as the boy said when he saw his daddy dead. I know lots of things I'd rather be in than a gun mess with the O I C."

Then when the cattle stampeded by, and all chance of profit from the run was gone, Hep called his men and headed for home. But he was furious at Obe Carter for the rolling the ranchman had given him the day before. As he rode on towards home, crossing the O I C range, his mind was busy with the problem of how he could even things with Carter. Finally, he pulled up and took Arizona and Clay into his confidence.

"You boys heard what old Obe Carter said yesterday. He meant it for you, same as he did for me. He'll win that

fight at the Pot Hole, but if he ain't killed, fellers like us will have no chance in this country. We can't get him, long as he's rich and can get men. We got to hit him where it hurts so bad he'll go crazy, and then we can take him."

"Yeah," said Arizona, "but where is that tender spot? Show me, and I'll hit him there myself."

"All right, I'll show you two tender spots. One is his ranch buildings and the other is his girl. We can hit him twice at one throw. Burn him out and take the girl, or else burn her with the house."

"No," said Clay, licking his thick, sensual lips. "Don't kill the girl. We'll take her along. I've seen her, and she's a dang good lookin' wench."

The three mounted tramps were within a mile of the O I C when they came upon the remuda, scattered across the trail and grazing quietly. Verne pulled up and said:

"We've got about all that's good out of our mounts, boys. Let's change. No telling how much more we'll have to ride."

The tramps knew their horses and could pick a good one, even in the starlight. Ten minutes later they were all mounted on fresh horses that were eager to go.

Just beyond the remuda was a strip of trees and brush that stood up like an island in the prairie. The trail crossed this. Verne, who was leading, reined his horse down to a walk. Here was a good place for an ambush, if any one was about the O I C. He had passed the little strip of woods, and was at the edge of the prairie again when he suddenly pulled his horse to its haunches, while Rile stopped on one side of him and Concho on the other.

"I saw a light," whispered Verne. "It flashed right out yonder by that little clump of trees. Looked like somebody struck a match, and—— There it is again!"

"Somebody struck a match all right," Rile whispered hoarsely.

"Hold my horse," said Verne, "and keep back in the woods. I'm going to take a look at that. If you hear a shot, come to me."

CHAPTER XIV

STERN JUSTICE FOR THREE

REMOVING his spurs, Verne stole away in the darkness. He gained the little clump of trees, which was about two hundred yards from where the three companions had stopped. Then he heard voices. They were at the edge of the little grove on the north side. Verne moved cautiously through the little grove until he could hear them plainly.

"Well," growled Arizona Pete, "what are we waitin' for, Hep? Let's go and have it over."

"Wait a bit," replied Hep. "I want the cook and the wrangler to be asleep. Then we'll go to the house, get the girl, and make a little fire. After that, we can 'tend to the wrangler and cook and fire the shacks. It pays to be careful."

"All the pay I want is the girl," said Clay, brutally. "Let me get my hands on her, with her mouth wrapped up so she can't squawk. I'll have her so far from here by mornin' and so well hid that nobody will ever find her."

The hair tingled on the back of Verne's neck. He began backing away cautiously. He knew there were three men there. He knew one of them was Hep Rogers, and that they were planning to burn the O I C and kidnap Bess Carter. The blood was drumming in his ears as he worked his way back to his companions.

"Going to swipe old Obe's gal?" said Concho, when he had heard the whispered story. "I didn't know he had a gal."

Rile said nothing, but he understood some things now. He knew why Verne had insisted on sticking it out with the O I C after that first gunfight, instead of advising them to quit the place, as rats do a burning ship.

"We want those fellows," said Verne, ignoring Concho's remark. "We want to get 'em without any shooting, if we can, but they mustn't get away. It's open prairie and no place to hide for a mile west of here. When we flush 'em, they'll head west for the Diamond D, and we'll take 'em in that mile. They have ridden their horses all day, and ours are fresh. Let's go."

Verne led the way south along the edge of the strip of timber, then turned in a wide circle which brought them up

beyond the little mount where Hep Rogers and his men waited. The first the three outlaws knew of danger was when Verne called to them:

"Hey. That you, Gregg? What are you fellows doing out here?"

The three riders shot into the prairie and headed west, just as Verne had predicted, while Verne and his companions gave chase. Hep and his men would have had a much better chance if they had stood and fought, there at the thicket, but it was too late to think of that now. Hoofs were pounding behind them, and their only hope was in the speed of their horses. Trying to shoot backward from a running horse in the dark was out of the question. They might have turned, stood together, and shot it out, but Hep's leadership was gone. It was every fellow for himself, and the devil take the hindmost.

For the first quarter mile the outlaws kept their lead of a hundred yards, but horses that have been ridden all day had no chance in a long run, with fresh ones. The gap began to close. Another quarter mile swept by under the flying hoofs. The three mounted tramps were fairly upon their prey. Hep and his men had drawn apart, but each heard pounding hoofs behind him.

There was the *whir* of a lariat, a jerk, and Hep Roger's light body went from the saddle, fell to the ground, and lay still, while Verne calmly tied him up as if he had been a yearling., He threw Rogers back on to his winded horse and rode on a hundred yards to where Rile was on the ground, tying up Clay. Together they went on to where Concho stood, holding two horses, and calmly looking down at something on the ground.

"Did you get your man, Conch?" asked Verne.

"Shore. Here he is, hawg-tied and breathin' hard."

A mile west of the O I C, at the edge of a considerable grove of timber, stood an immense spreading tree. Hep Rogers was whining:

"You fellers ain't got no call to make us climb that tree without a ladder. We ain't did nothin' but hit back at a feller that hit us. Ary one of you would do the same thing. You fellers was with Obe Carter when he comes to the Dimunt D and rides me ragged. He didn't find no O I C's on our range, because we hadn't driv none. Wouldn't you hit back, if somebody rode you like that when you was in the clear?"

"Maybe," said Verne. "Whether you drove any O I C's to your range or not, you belong to Joe Peel's gang, and——"

"Whatcha mean, Joe Peel's gang? Joe Peel ain't got no gang. He's got a steer ranch, and is an honest rancher, with a small outfit, tryin' to make out here in the Twin Rivers country, in spite of Obe Carter, just like me and some more."

"Yes? Funny that Joe would have his gang burning that Circle H G brand over the O I C, if he's honest."

"That weren't Joe's outfit. That was some of them Pot Hole fellers. They's always been some in them roughs that were wrong. When that herd started to run——"

"Oh, you was there?"

"No, I weren't, but if any burnin' was bein' did, them Pot Hole fellers done it."

"Listen, Hep," said Verne. "I wouldn't hang a rustler if I caught him with the goods. It's natural for a thief to steal. I'd just shoot him like I would a wolf that was tryin' to hamstring a beef. But you and these two fellows have done something bad."

"Whu—what do you mean?"

"I mean that I heard you say you were going to burn Carter's house and steal his daughter. That's a hangin' job, and I don't want to argue. There is nothing you can tell me about Joe Peel that I want to know, and if there was, this is one time that I won't trade."

When the three mounted tramps finally reached the O I C, Carter and the other men had not come in. It was a long trek from Pot Hole prairie, and they would travel slowly with the dead. Verne took a grip on himself and went to the house. In spite of his handicap and the knowledge that he could never claim Bess Carter, he wanted to see her, wanted to know beyond doubt that she was safe.

Hearing him enter the yard, Bess went to the door and stood in the dim light from the lamp in an inner room. "Is that you, father?" she called, peering out into the darkness.

"No, ma'am," replied Verne. "Mr. Carter is comin' on with some of the boys that was—was hurt some."

"Oh, I'm so glad you came, Verne. I've been worried all day about—father and the rest of you. How many were—were hurt?"

"Several. Mr. Carter or Gregg can tell you all about it. We came ahead to—we thought—how's Tommy?"

"He has had a good day, and he's asleep now. Had—had I better get the medicine and things and some bandages for the men that are hurt?"

"No, ma'am. They—they won't need anything. I must be going now." Verne turned abruptly and left the house. As he rode back to the pens where Rile and Concho were waiting he muttered to himself: "Hell of a life for a girl like that. If we hadn't come just when we did——"

At the pens, Verne said:

"Boys, just let that little mess we had ride. I'll tell it when it has to be told. If it gets known it might scare—Tommy, and he's got a pretty bad leg."

"All right, Verne," said Rile, his lips twisting in a queer, knowing smile in the darkness.

The outfit came in an hour later, and the dead men were laid out. Verne did not know how much old Obe Carter was going to tell Bess, nor how brutally he was going to tell it. He was only glad that he had not had to tell her that half of the O I C men were dead, and the whole country full of outlaws, determined to put Obe Carter out of business.

He was glad, too, that Carter could not tell her about the attempt to burn the ranch and abduct her, because he knew nothing about it. Carter had to be told of that, had to be made to see the danger, or he would leave Bessie and Tommy there again, alone in the middle of hell.

Next morning, after the dead had been buried, Verne took Carter aside and said: "Mr. Carter, I want you and Gregg to go with the boys and me. I want to show you something."

"Huh? What is it?"

"I'll show you."

"All right," grumbled Carter. "Reck'n I ought to humour you. Hadn't been for you, wouldn't none of us be here now. We ought to get out on the range, but——"

"Let the other boys wait here until we get back," said Verne. "They need a little rest, and we won't be gone long."

On that mile ride Obe Carter wondered what he was going to see but asked no questions. When he saw that big tree, with its strange fruit, he said:

"Well, I'll be damned! I thought I heard you say you didn't believe in hanging rustlers. Said it was too cold. Thought they ought to be shot, like wolves, coyotes, bob-cats, and the like that ketches little calves."

"Yes, I said that. We didn't hang those fellows for rustling."

"Didn't eh? What the he'l did you hang 'em for?"

Verne told the story, with Obe Carter cursing a blue streak as it developed. Then, when it was finished, he demanded:

"Did you tell Bessie about that?"

"No, sir."

"Then don't tell her. She's been wanting to get away from the O I C. Had a fool idea about takin' Tommy somewhere and sendin' him to school. If she hears that, she never will stay at the ranch alone again."

Verne looked Obe Carter up and down in silence. He was going to say something to the old ranchman that he might get shot for, but hell couldn't stop him from saying it.

"I'm not going to tell her," he said calmly, "but I'm going to tell you a few things. One is that your daughter and your little crippled son are not going to be left alone again while I work for you."

"While you work for me?" snarled Carter. "You don't have to work for me, do you?"

"No, I don't, and if I've got to take a chance on seeing that girl and a helpless little boy murdered, I'm ready to ride right now. If you think more of your damned cattle than you do of your family, you're not the sort of man I want to work for. You're not fit for any decent man to have anything to do with."

"Hold on," roared Carter. "You're talkin' rough as hell. What's the matter with you?"

"I'm telling you what's the matter. You think you won a big victory yesterday, when you got back a thousand steers, except what were killed in the stampede. I want to tell you that when you trade ten good honest men for twenty-five rustlers and killers, it ain't a good trade, and it ain't a victory. More than that, I'm going to tell you what you are and let you think it over.

"You are an overbearing, selfish old fool, who wouldn't worship a god that didn't have horns. You've run this country until you think you can't be whipped, and you are whipped to a rag right now. This trouble has just started. Joe Peel can get all the killers he wants, and he's going to trim you."

Obe Carter was so astonished he couldn't speak. He whirled his horse and led the way back to the ranch at a gallop

CHAPTER XV

Bessie Goes Bronc

"Well, here's where we hit the trail again," said Concho to Rile, as they drew near the ranch. "Wonder if Verne will take that blue roan he won off the old man. That old shell he's riding in here is goin' to fall down and come apart the first dog hole he strikes."

"I don't know what Verne's goin' to do," said Rile thoughtfully. "He got mad and lost his head, and that ain't like him. But he told old Obe some raw truth, and if Obe hadn't run away he'd 'a' got him told good. A regular place to eat and sleep and a chance for money enough to buy a few drinks when round-up is over, is all right, but—I can't say I'll be sorry to ride away from the O I C. I've seen some rough deals, but I can't see any way for the O I C to win out of this mess. Carter ain't got as much chance as a broken-legged calf in a wolf den."

"You shore let yo' tongue slip and told the truth that time, Rile. If we did stick on here, the only round-up we got a chance at is the one up yonder where they give out silk ropes and gold spurs, and the broncs wear silver shoes. It don't take no money to buy drinks there, everything's free. I reck'n it's a nice place, but—I ain't plumb ready to go yet, and if we stay with this outfit about one more day, it'll happen."

Instead of giving the three mounted tramps what he thought was coming to them and telling them to mount and ride, old Obe quit his men at the pens, rode up to the house, dismounted and went in. He sat down in the big room, looked at Tommy a moment, then blurted out:

"Bessie, you been jerkin' at yo' rope, an' tryin' to pull up yo' lariat stake for two-three year. Been wantin' to get away from the O I C, send Tommy to school, and all. It ain't been no lack of money that's kept me agin it. I got plenty money. It was—— Well, you wouldn't understand.

"I've fit for this old ranch, and it looks like they won't be no end of fightin'. I ain't young any more. I wanted to bring Tommy up on the range and make him a gun-slingin' fool that nesters and rustlers would be afraid of, so's he could carry on here in the Twin Rivers country when I'm through. But his leg's busted now, and no tellin' when he can ride again. The old O I C is on the rocks, and it looks like there won't be

no ranch for him to fight for, when this mess is over. You'd better pack up yo'n Tommy's things and get ready to ride. I'll have Gregg hitch up the buckboard and take you and the boy to the railroad. Pick the place you want to go. I don't want my children to play second fiddle to nobody.

"I'll give you a bundle of cheque-books. Get the best place in town to live, buy everything you see that's fit to eat or wear, and live like humans. Me? I—I'll just stick it out here at the old O I C. I aim to be buried out there by yo' ma. It'll—it'll be pretty lonesome here without you and Tommy, but——"

Obe Carter broke off. He had never let that much sentiment creep into his tones before in his life. The truth was that Obe Carter, king of the Twin Rivers country for years, was whipped to a rag. He had not known, had not realized, until Verne told him, that he had taken a terrible whipping at the Pot Hole valley the day before.

He had always thought in terms of cattle. He had been selfish and overbearing. He had not reasoned in terms of men. He had always been able to get men, but he could not get them now. Another fight like that—No, he couldn't have, mustn't have, another fight like that. If he did, he would reap the last sheaf of what he had sown in the Twin Rivers country in all these years.

Rustling was wrong, yes, but who had made these rustlers? Certainly he had contributed, at least to their hatred of him. He couldn't give back before dishonesty now. It would do no good. He must fight on to the end, but the end was in sight, and it was a bad ending—a last fight for him. The fate of the O I C was no longer in the hands of Obe Carter. He admitted it to no one else, but locked in his heart was the secret knowledge that he was whipped. He had stopped speaking, because he was afraid his voice would betray that knowledge to his daughter and to the little crippled boy on the bed. He started from this unhappy reverie when Bessie spoke.

"Why, dad, I'm not going to leave the O I C and you, when things are like that. I did want to go and give Tommy a chance, while the ranch was prosperous and everything lovely, but I won't go now—until this fight is won or lost."

He wanted to speak the truth and tell that the fight was already lost, but the words stuck in his throat.

"It's—it's goin' to be dangerous here, Bessie," Carter went on. "There's only ten of us left, all told. The only

new men I have been able to get this spring is them three mounted tramps." Bessie winced at the expression. Carter didn't notice it, and went on. "They wouldn't have signed on if they had known the situation, and why they stayed until now, I don't know. I guess they are going now."

"No!" The single word came like a shot from Bessie, while Tommy piped up. "I betcha Verne won't quit and leave us in a hole."

"Tommy's right," said Bessie, with conviction. "I don't know anything about those three men. I have seen Verne; the others I have not seen at all. You call them tramps. Perhaps they are drifters, but—Verne is a real man, and the other two must be, or he would not be with them. If they stay, you can still win this fight. If they go, you have already lost it. Whatever happens, I stay at the O I C as long as—as long as you stay."

Obe Carter rose and left the room without another word. "Been thinking of her as a girl all along," he muttered to himself as he went towards his horse. "She's a woman now. The most uncertain thing on earth. Rather bet on a crooked monte game than on a woman any day. Week ago, when everything was quiet, she was rearing to go. Now that hell's openin' at her feet, she goes bronc and won't budge. What the blitherin' hell can I do? That yard fence is apt to be the lines of the O I C any day. I know when I'm got, and they've got me. But I'll be damned if I leave."

Carter jabbed in his spurs and rode on back to the pens. His three mounted tramps stood in a little group apart from the others. He noticed for the first time that they had each confiscated one of those long rifles from the Pot Hole battlefield. That, in addition to their pistol belts, each of which held two forty-fives, they now wore snug-fitting belts, filled with those long, brassy 30-30 cartridges, with their soft, blue noses. He rode up to them and dismounted. There was a moment of tense silence, and then Carter said:

"Verne, step over here a minute. I want to talk to you." They went a little way from the others. "You talked to me a while ago in a way that no man ever had the nerve to talk to me before, and——"

"I lost my head and told you the truth," said Verne. "If you think I ought to, I'll apologize."

"I don't want you to apologize. No man ought to apologize for tellin' the truth. I ain't as hard with my family

as you think I am, but it looked that way to you. You said I was already whipped and didn't know it. You're right, but I didn't see it until you showed it to me. I thought I won that fight yesterday, but I lost it and lost it bad."

"Yes, you lost it, and you'll lose the next one, because you don't know how to fight."

"The hell I don't! Been fightin' all my life, and I ain't afraid of——"

"That's just the trouble. You know how to take chances on being killed. I don't see how you ever got out of that fight alive. Those fellows were doing their best to get you. The whole trouble is, this gang is a new kind of rustler in this country. They are cold murderers. Look at the guns they pack."

"Yes," drawled Carter, "I notice you three fellers picked up three of 'em."

"You bet your life we did. Any time I can make my arms as long as the other fellow's in a fight, I do it. If I hadn't, we would not be here now."

"That's true, too. Do you see any way that the O I C can win out of this mess?"

"Yes. There's one way. That is to get hold of Joe Peel and hang him."

"What makes you think Joe Peel is at the back of all this?"

"I don't think it, I know it."

"You told me that once before, and I been wonderin' how you, bein' a stranger in the country, knew so much about Joe Peel. I ain't askin' you to tell. I'm in a jam. If I apologize for what I said, will you and them other boys stay with me?"

"I had no intention of quitting. The only thing I ask is that you don't leave your home unprotected again. Did you tell Miss—your daughter what happened last night?"

"No, I didn't, and I hope to God nobody ever tells her, for—Verne, I can't understand a woman. A week ago, Bessie was rearin' to leave the O I C. I told her a while ago it was gettin' dangerous here, and for her and Tommy to pack and go where it was safe. She just stiffened her forelegs, pulled back on the hackamore, and said 'No.' Said she'd never leave here as long as I stayed. Women are shore funny. Bettin' on a shell game is easy money compared to bettin' on a woman."

Whatever Verne thought, he didn't say anything. He was all hot inside. Something told him that Obe Carter had not come to him of his own accord.

"She won't leave, and I'm willin' to leave a man or two here all the time if you boys will stay and help me out."

"All right. Now I'll tell you what I know about Joe Peel, and how I found it out." Then Verne told Carter about the fight in the Silver Spur and what he had heard there.

"Well, I'll be damned," said Carter. "That helps. You boys got Hep and Clay and Arizona last night, and you got some more in that fight. You've broke up the Diamond D outfit, and we won't have to watch that side no more."

"We haven't broken up anything," said Verne. "There never was a Diamond D outfit. All these fellows are organized under Joe Peel to clean the O I C. There are probably more men and worse ones there now than there ever were."

"Huh. You say Peel is back of all this. If he is, he's too smooth to be caught with the goods. Lacey Boatwright rodded the Pot Hole gang. Peel would say he bought them Circle H G steers from Lacey, and nobody could prove different, because I shot Lacey apart yesterday. If a man with some brains and some money is back of this——"

"A man with brains and money is no better off in a cold showdown than anybody else," said Verne.

"Maybe not, but how's anybody going to get Joe Peel to a cold showdown?"

"I don't know. We'll have to wait and see. Meantime, give your men a chance to rest. We can't work the range with ten men, and things like they are. You stay here with the other men. All of you rest up and get in shape. I'll take Rile and Concho and do some scouting. We can reach as far as they can. If we need you, we'll yell for you."

"All right, but——" Carter stopped. There was a note of hidden doubt in his tone. They stood up. Verne looked the old ranchman square in the eye, as he said:

"Mr. Carter, you have probably thought a good many things about me since I've been here. I'm sure you have thought a time or two that my two friends and I might belong to the gang that's riding you. I'm not an ordinary saddle-tramp. That's all I'll say about myself. All I know about Rile and Concho is that they'll stick in a pinch and will follow

me anywhere. We can't do you any good if you don't place confidence in us."

"I'm trustin' you, all right," said Carter, "and there's my hand on it." He extended his hand and Verne gripped it. "I just happened to think of something else. It ain't got nothin' to do with this mess. I may talk to you about it some time, but not now."

"All right. We're going to ride. We may be back in an hour, and we may not be back in a week. All I ask is that you don't leave——"

"You don't have to ask me that," said Carter. "What nearly happened last night has soaked into me good. The seven of us will stick close around the ranch until we hear from you."

"We're goin' to ride," Verne said to Rile and Concho, as he climbed to his saddle.

"Well, we got to get our own mounts, ain't we?" asked Concho. "I don't want to be ketched ridin' off on no O I C bronc. My neck's too tender."

"We ain't quittin' the O I C," said Verne, turning his horse.

Rile made no comment, but silently fell in behind Verne as he led away on the Horcado trail.

"Three mounted tramps," mused Obe Carter, as he watched them out of sight. "Maybe they ain't—I can read Concho like a book, I can cipher Rile some too, but Verne—— Damn funny things happen in this old world, and happen mighty quick sometimes. I wonder now—— Oh, hell, what's the use? I'm gamblin' and my last blue chip is stacked on them three tramps."

CHAPTER XVI

Out for Blood

The O I C was not the only place where conferences and heart-to-heart talks were being held that morning. Far back on the hills between the Pot Hole cabins and the Double Springs ranch, six men sat in a group in a deep, hidden pocket.

One of them was Joe Peel, still neatly clad. The other five were his chief lieutenants. There was not a man among them who looked like what he was—just a common thug. They might have been more or less prosperous ranchmen, or range

bosses for big outfits. They had been talking there for an hour.

"Here's the situation in a nutshell," said Peel, at last. "You fellows come down here, expecting to drive a thousand Circle H G steers north. Stick around and you'll drive two or three thousand. I never have failed on a job, and I won't fail on this one. The organization sent me down here to put the screws on Obe Carter, so he would be glad to sell and get out of the Twin Rivers country. I had everything all cut and dried.

"Every nester and long-loop man in the country was raring to go. They were easy to organize. Then something happened, and it took me a while to find out what it was. Old Obe Carter has imported three swift killers. All he had was about twenty old, worn-out punchers, and those three gunners. Yesterday, Carter jumped the boys at Pot Hole prairie. It was a nasty mess, but we won it. We lost a lot of men, and they got the cattle back, but we can get more men, and we can get the cattle. Carter lost half of his men, and he can't get any more.

"When we get rid of them three killers it will be just like taking candy from a baby to clean the O I C and kill Obe Carter, if he don't get out of the country. Then we'll have an open trail clean through from Mexico to Montana. I had a different idea about handling the O I C. Some things that I figured in myself. I like this country, and thought I would like to settle at Double Springs, permanent. But, no matter. That's all off now. I can settle somewhere else—when I get ready. From here on this is a straight gun job."

"If the O I C don't make it a rope job," said a big, dark fellow called Ray Curtan.

"Never mind any crêpe-hanging," said Peel. "Two of my best men are out. Lacey Boatwright lost most of his head at the Pot Hole fight, and Dave Stoak has a belly-full of lead, if he is still alive. Curtan, I want you to take Lacey's job at the Pot Hole. Get your men together, and keep quiet until you hear from me. Landers, you go to the Diamond D, take over the outfit, and wait orders there. Hep Rogers was a good man for that place in my first plan, but won't do now. He may complain. If he does, tell him it is my orders. Then——"

Peel sat for a full minute, as if weighing some deep problem. At last he said:

"Idaho, Kansas and Cherokee, I've got a special job for you. How well and how quick you can do it will decide how soon we can drive two or three thousand newly branded Circle H G steers north through Lost Indian Pass in the San Felipes. It will also decide how soon the O I C is out of business. That job is to get Carter's three hired killers."

"Where's the huntin' ground?" asked Idaho, as he rolled a smoke with his long, slim hands.

"Horcado. Just drift in there and giye it out that you are steer buyers, waiting for the round-ups to be over. Plenty of 'em come there. I'll give you the word. Get acquainted with Nick Speed, the bartender at the Silver Spur saloon.

"He's the only man in our outfit that knows Carter's killers. Then just stick around until Nick shows 'em to you, and do your stuff."

Joe Peel watched them all riding away, then said to himself:

"The beginning of the end for the O I C. I had some dreams, but—— Oh, well. Women and business never did mix well. It's better to play one at a time. There are plenty of others. Wiser, maybe, than that ranch girl, but not too wise for Joe Peel."

He mounted his horse and rode for Double Springs, armed, he thought, with an iron-clad alibi, if he was ever charged with knowing anything about those Circle H G steers more than that he had bought the brand from Lacey Boatwright, who was dead, and the cattle had not been delivered to him when Boatwright was killed.

Mr. Stephen Landers was the first of Peel's new men to get a real thrill out of his job. Steve had once been a member of a gang that Obe Carter broke up, after hanging a few of them. He had thrown the long-loop in every hidden spot in the Twin Rivers country, and knew every trail and draw. He had just been made manager of the Diamond D. He was a cowman and had a right to ride the open range when and where he pleased. The shortest way to the Diamond D was straight across the O I C range. Steve wanted a look at that range anyway. If Carter had lost men until he had only ten left, it couldn't be very dangerous.

So, Steve rode jauntily across the O I C, boldly taking a course that would pass about a mile north of the O I C ranch-house, going directly towards the Diamond D. If he

was going to be seen, it was safer to be seen riding boldly in the open than sneaking up draws and keeping in the brush.

Landers saw no one. For the first few miles he occasionally saw a steer with a broken leg or a droop horn that had been in the stampede the day before. Then he reached the broad mesa on the divide between the Twins, where the O I C was located. He glimpsed no rider. Cattle grazed quietly in little groups. He was well beyond the little grove where the three mounted tramps had changed horses the night before, and holding his course through the prairie.

"Joe Peel made a mistake," he mused. "This was the day to clean the O I C range. When you knock a fellow down, the time to trim him right is before he gets up again. They must have hit the O I C harder than Joe thought they did. He's boss, but he's overlookin' a bet. A dozen men could clean this range of everything but the cripples." Steve was nearing some timber. He looked up, then went on. "Ain't seen them many buzzards at one time in a year. Wonder what——"

Steve broke off his unspoken musings. He had rounded a little clump of trees that stood off from the main forest, and there he got his thrill. A perfect cloud of buzzards rose from the limbs of a big tree and joined those that were circling in the air. Steve was tough and he had seen plenty of men hanging in trees, but this sudden picture caused his scalp to prickle. He rode on up to the bodies.

"Huh. Hep, Pete, and Clay, I reck'n Hep won't complain about me takin' over the Diamond D, after all. Old Obe Carter ain't forgot how to make 'em climb a rope ladder with nothin' under their feet. If I meet him, we'll shoot it out, but I don't want to meet him right now."

Steve spurred on into the dense woods, without looking for a trail, and held his course on towards the Diamond D. He must get word of this to Joe Peel. It would make the whole rustler world determined to get Obe Carter. Obe's liberality with hemp was the one thing that made them hate him most. Peel had told his three fast gunners to get the three mounted tramps. The most important thing was to get Obe Carter and get him quick, before he decorated any more trees with hemp bangles and human pendants.

The three mounted tramps had ridden the Horcado trail until they came to a deep cañon that slashed into the divide from the east. It was called Cow Creek Cañon. The clear

stream that headed in the gorge ran east into East Fork. The main trail went around the head of the canon, but there was a dim trail that led down into it. Verne and his two followers took this trail. He had not spoken a word since leaving the O I C. They dismounted, turned their horses loose on a narrow strip of grass that grew along the bank of the stream, sat down on some rocks, and rolled cigarettes.

"Boys," said Verne finally, "we are going to whip Joe Peel's outfit to a standstill."

"That's good news," grinned Concho. "I been thinkin' they was goin' to nail our hides to the barn. We got some of 'em yestiddy, but they's a right smart squad of 'em left. Looks like too many for three men."

"We'll never fight all of them at once," said Verne. "Whenever we hang Joe Peel, the war will be over."

"Yes, *when* we do," said Rile. "That bird is a fox. There are plenty of men that he'd rather see killed than himself."

"Very likely," drawled Verne. "There have been some terrible bad men in this cow country, but there has never been one that somebody didn't finally get. We've got to get Joe Peel, and the only place we'll ever get him is at Horcado. As soon as the rest of these killers know that Joe is hung up, they'll quit cold."

"If Joe runs it, they'll all be cold before he's caught," said Concho.

"Maybe so, but here's the situation. If Obe Carter hadn't been so overbearing and selfish all these years, other cowmen for miles around would come to him, for they all hate a rustler. It looks to me like they're just standing off until Carter learns that a man can't get along without friends, no matter how big he is. Carter has learned the lesson, all right, but—I saw some fellows hang a man once, just a little, to make him talk.

"They figured a little too close on the time a man could get along without breathing. When they let him down—— He hasn't talked yet. Looks to me like the other ranchmen have just about done that to old man Obe. He's whipped. If this fight is won, we three have got to whip Joe Peel's outfit, a few at a time."

"All right," growled Rile. "You're boss of this set of triplets. Lead us to a bunch you think we can lick and sick us on 'em."

"Good, I knew you boys would stay with me," Verne said. "Now, we are going right down this cañon to its mouth, and strike the trail that leads from Double Springs to Horcado. Peel's outfit won't be lookin' for us on their own trail, and we'll be lookin' for them. According to old Gregg's map, this canon hits East Fork a mile above Horcado. Let's go."

They stopped just before reaching the mouth of the cañon. Hiding their horses in a lateral gorge, they took their guns and crept to the mouth of the cañon, where they hid among some big rocks. The narrow valley of East Fork, not more than a hundred yards wide on that side, lay before them. It was open ground, and they could see the worn Double Springs trail about fifty yards away and well below them.

"If you ever have to shoot from here," said Verne calmly, "be careful you don't overshoot. It's considerably downhill to that trail."

"Why, Verne," grinned Concho, "you don't aim to bush them fellers, like a danged Injun, do you?"

"Not unless I've got the goods on 'em," replied Verne. "Three men can never whip a thousand, according to Queensbury rules. I'd shoot Joe Peel from cover, just like I would a grizzly bear, or any other predatory animal. He—— Listen!"

Horses were crossing the rock ford of East Fork, just beyond a fringe of trees. A moment later three riders came out in the open, heading for Horcado. They were Idaho, Kansas, and Cherokee!

The three tramps lay quietly among the rocks and watched them pass, thereby making the first mistake in their three-men fight against an army, because none of them knew any of the riders. They looked like ordinary cowmen. So, the three gunners went on to Horcado to take up their post and lie in wait for the men who had let them escape.

Not another rider had passed that way when the sun went down. As they stole back to their horses Verne said: "We're going to Horcado and learn the news."

CHAPTER XVII

A Queer Fight

THERE were two bartenders on watch in Horcado who were going to help make some Twin Rivers history, yet they didn't know it.

Nick Speed was standing with his hairy hands on that copper gutter, still keeping them six feet apart in repose. His lips were swollen. There was a question in his little black eyes as he looked at the three strangers he had just served. He had served three strangers two nights before. Not the same three, it was true, but three strangers, and he had not forgotten it. His wart-like head was still pretty tender, and he had joined the no-hat brigade.

"We're from the Double Springs outfit, pardner," said Idaho as he set his empty glass down and motioned at the bottle.

"Sez you," growled Nick. "What's the word?"

Idaho leaned over and spoke a few words to the bar-keep. "Okay," said Nick. "Got any news to give out?"

"Not a new. We're huntin' something. Remember three gents that was in here night before last, and messed the place up some?"

"Hell, yes!" snarled Nick, putting his hand to his head gingerly. "What about 'em?"

"We're goin' to get 'em."

"Oh, you are? Well, I'm in on it, but—you fellers better get some traps, or put out wo'f poison in raw meat, if you want to get them birds. They're rough."

"Let us do the worryin' about that," said Idaho. "I figure the Silver Spur is a good enough trap, and we've got the wolf poison with us." Idaho patted his gun, and went on: "If a feller ever catches a fish, he's apt to try again in the same hole. Them chaps had some luck in here the other night, and they'll come back. It may be a week, but they'll come. What time of night don't you have nobody in here?"

"I don't have nobody no time," snarled Nick, "if I don't want 'em. I tell 'em to git out, and if they don't, I throw 'em out."

Nick knew he was a liar, but he didn't want those fellows to know. He had threatened to throw three drunks out two nights before, and had failed dismally.

"Fine," said Idaho. "Better give the word that you don't want any trade after nine o'clock. We're going to look the town over. What kinda lookin' birds are them gents, if we happen to run into 'em?"

Nick described the three mounted tramps accurately. He never would forget how they looked.

Half an hour later Joe Peel's three killers lounged into the King Pin. At the door they brought up sharp and shot glances from one to another.

"Hallo, Idaho. Howdy, Kansas," greeted Val Thorpe. "Who's your friend?"

"That's Cherokee," said Idaho, as the three lined up at the bar and shook hands with Val. "What you doin' away out here in the forks of the creek, Val?"

"Oh, just tendin' a little bar for the King Pin," said Val. "What'll it be, gents?"

When they had taken their drinks, Idaho didn't wait for questions. He didn't want any asked just then, but he did want to ask a few.

"We're buyin' steers now, Val," he said. "We got in here a little early, but we wanted to get in on the ground floor. Ought to be right smart good beef in this Twin Rivers country."

"Yes, ought to," admitted Val.

"How long you been here, Val?"

"A little."

"Not long."

"Acquainted some?"

"Know Joe Peel?"

"When I see him. Never talked to him. He don't drink none."

"He shore don't. Never did. I reck'n a lot of us would be better off if we didn't drink quite so much. Still and all, a few drinks don't hurt nobody. Fill 'em up again, boys. Know the Big Boy, Obe Carter?"

"Yes," replied Val. "Him and his hands come in here sometimes."

"Good. We want to see him. He ought to have plenty of good steers. If any of his boys come in, let us know. I'd like to find out if he's sold his beef. If he has, there ain't much use in us stickin' around."

The three killers took another drink and sauntered out.

"That King Pin is the hang-out for the O I C outfit," said Idaho, as they walked back to the Silver Spur. "We'd be more likely to strike them fellers in there, but the Spur is our best bet. The Pin's home to them fellers, and a man fights better at home. Besides that, Val Thorpe ain't the sort of bartender we want. He's on the level, and won't have any rough stuff in the joint when he's on deck. I heard him tell three fellers to get out one night up at Abilene, and they wanted to argue it with him. In about a minute they was packed out."

Val Thorpe was alone behind his bar about nine o'clock that night. He had been wondering all day why there seemed to be no one in town. He knew there was a war going on, but he had not heard about the battle of Pot Hole prairie. He didn't know that both sides were taking a rest, and looking for a tender spot in which to strike the next blow. Val was not thinking of that now, however. He had just solved that old but very intricate problem of putting two and two together so the result would be more than the usual four. His solution was:

"Idaho and Kansas are cold killers. Cherokee is one, or he wouldn't run with 'em. They ain't no more steer buyers than I'm twins. They're huntin' somebody, and if I had two guesses who it is, I'd give one of 'em back. Joe Peel has sicked 'em on them three saddle tramps that messed the Spur up the other night, and——"

Val glanced towards the back door as he heard a little noise, and saw Verne peering in. Val sped to that back door. Verne had stepped aside in the shadow.

"Don't come in here," said Val, in a low tone. "You ain't got as much business in Horcado as a chicken's got in a fox-fight, and that ain't hardly none."

"Who's in town?"

"Just three men—until you came."

"Fine. That makes six now. We'll get a crowd yet. Who are these gents?"

"Three of the fastest gunners and the coldest killers in the known world, and they are lookin' for you three saddle-drifters, to square that mess you made at the Spur the other night."

Val went on hurriedly to tell what he knew, and a lot that he suspected.

"Now, it's like this, Verne. The Pin tries to be a

decent place. I don't allow no rough plays in the joint when I'm on deck. Of course, if it just has to come to a cold show-down in here, I'd side with you boys, because I'm Obe Carter's friend. I know he's gettin' a raw deal, and I know you fellows are helping him out all you can. Still, if you just got to mix smoke with them killers, it'll be better for it to happen some-where else. Anything I can do, I will do, but if you boys come in here, it'll happen any minute."

"All right, Val. We won't come in. Have you got a trunk?"

"Trunk? What do you want with a trunk?

"I don't want one. I want you to go over to the store and get about fifty feet of very small cotton rope to tie your trunk, then bring it to me."

"I getcha," said Val.

When Verne and his two partners crept out of the chapar-ral a little while later, each of them had two short lengths of rope looped conveniently in his belt, as if they were going into a rope-and-tie contest at a rodeo.

"Now, boys," said Verne, "we don't want to fumble this little job. There'll be gun-stuff and plenty of it. Those birds will be in the Silver Spur, and they'll be looking for us. When we step in, I'll be in the middle, with one of you on each side of me. They'll swing around. Each of you take the man on his side, and I'll take the middle one and watch Ratface with one eye. If you can hit a gun, hit it. If you can't, take an arm, but don't kill your man, unless it comes to a showdown. Here we go."

There was no one in the street. A bar of pale yellow light fell out of the front door of the Silver Spur, and was lost in the darkness. The three killers were making a very bad mistake. Nick had warned them that they were drinking too much, but it did no good.

"That's all right, Nick," said Idaho. "We know you mean all right, but we haven't had anything to drink for a week. There's nobody in town to-night, and we'll just load up once. Fel——"

"There they are," snapped Nick, and darted behind the bar as three men sprang in at the front door with guns in their hands.

The killers swung around from the bar, with Idaho in the middle. Shots began to crash as their guns left their holsters. In ten seconds, not one of them had a gun and not

one of them had a scratch on him. Two of the guns had been shot away by a man who had held thousands spell-bound while he shot the ashes from a friend's cigar. Verne could put lead where he wanted it. Rile had got the other one.

Then the fight began. Those three men were not only gunners—they were rough and tumble fighters. Each of the three tramps went on to his man, and in a minute they were fighting all over the place. Verne hit Idaho with his fist and knocked him kicking, just as he saw Nick's wart of a head appear above the bar, and his two hairy paws, with a gun in each. Verne fired once, and went on with his fighting. He knew where that bullet went, and that the big gorilla of a bartender would never mix into another saloon brawl.

Kansas was a husky brute, and was giving Rile all the fight he wanted, while Cherokee was far too much man for the wiry little Concho to handle. Verne jerked his ropes loose and tied Idaho's hands before he came out of his trance. Then he turned to see Cherokee go down on top of Concho, and wrest his gun from his hand.

At a single bound, Verne was on top of them. He caught Cherokee's arm and pulled it up, just as the killer pulled the trigger of Concho's gun. The fire from the shot signed Concho's hair. A moment later Cherokee thought his head was going to be pulled from his body. Verne was strong-arming the outlaw mercilessly.

Concho came out of it, tied Cherokee's hands and got to his feet. Verne stood up and got his breath. Rile and Kansas were still fighting. Rile tried to strike with his gun, and Kansas caught his arm. Rile jerked free and threw down on Kansas, who was backing away. Verne struck the gun down and the bullet went through the floor. He didn't want Kansas shot.

Idaho, whose feet were not tied, sprang up and bolted for the front door. Concho was on him like a terrier. He tripped the outlaw and proceeded calmly to tie his feet. Meantime, Verne and Rile brought Kansas down and bound him. When they had regained their breath, Verne said:

"Now, you three bullies, listen to me just a moment. I'm going to untie your feet. I don't want to hear a squawk out of any of you. The only gag I'm going to use is a gun. At the first chirp I hear, it goes off. Get up and come on." They walked out of the saloon, each of the three tramps leading an outlaw whose hands were bound.

Verne had located the outlaws' horses. They had left them saddled, with the idea of a quick getaway if they had trouble. They meant to ride with all speed for Double Springs to tell Joe Peel they had finished their job. Perhaps they would do that yet, but the chance was exceedingly slim. Each of the killers was put on his own saddle, his hands bound to the saddle-horn, and a rope tied across from one of his feet to the other, under the horse's belly.

An odd procession crossed the main street and disappeared into the chaparral back of the King Pin. A few minutes later, Verne stepped in at the back door and walked to the bar.

"What happened down at the Spur?" asked Val.

"Nothing much. If Joe Peel comes in and asks about Idaho, Kansas, and Cherokee, tell him they have gone to the O I C to look at Obe Carter's steers."

"Hell, no!" said Val in astonishment. "Did—did you three birds kill them tough *hombres?*"

"No, we didn't hurt 'em. They're plumb friendly now. Is my credit good for a flat pint of the best whisky you've got?"

Val's reply was to shove a pint bottle of case goods across the bar. Verne took it and walked out.

"Talk about yo' cool ones," mused Val. "There's the coolest proposition that ever hit this old cow town. If Obe Carter had a few more like him, he might not win this argument he's havin', but he'd worry them fellers some."

Andy Antrell, who had cowered in his room above the Silver Spur while the fight was going on, finally mustered courage to go down. There was one light still burning. At first glance, all he saw was a mess of overturned chairs and tables, the big stove lying on its side, and joints of pipe scattered about the floor, each one more or less a ruin. Then he called Nick. No answer. He went around, peered behind the bar, and got his answer, which was louder than all the yelling in the world.

"Well, I'll be damned," he muttered. "Joe Peel said them three fellers were sure-shot killers. They're gone and the only drop of blood in the house is behind the bar, where somebody ruined the best bartender I had."

A mile from Horcado and not far from the mouth of Cow Creek Cañon, six men sat their horses in a group. Idaho was talking: "If you birds want to break up what's ridin' the O I C," he said, "you'll have to get a whole lot more than us."

"We intend to get more," said Verne grimly. "Where's Joe Peel?"

"Joe Peel? What about him?"

"Nothing, only we know he's the head of the outfit, and we're going to get him. Naturally, we want to know where he is. It might save us a lot of riding."

"It'll save yo' necks, if you three saddle-drifters turn us loose, take a couple of hundred dollars, and ride out of this country before Joe Peel gets his hands on you."

"Oh, I don't know," said Verne. "We ain't so easy ourselves. Joe sent you fellows to get us. I guess he hasn't got anything faster than you are. If you're not going to answer any more questions, we'll ride. We're going a little farther your way."

Long after midnight the three mounted tramps rode out of the head of Cow Creek Cañon. There was no one with them. They went on to the O I C, were challenged by a guard that Carter had set, and went on to the bunk-house and to bed.

Towards daylight, Joe Peel mounted his horse and set out alone for Horcado. He was simply going to be a very busy steer buyer for the next few days, and he thought he could handle more business and with greater safety from the room over the Silver Spur. He would slip in about daylight.

He reached the river before it was good daylight and stopped in the narrow stream to water his horse. The animal refused to drink, but kept looking on across the stream and snorting. Out on the bank, it bolted, and turned back into the water.

Peel spurred it out again, but the horse stopped and stood trembling. Then Peel saw what the trouble was. A long limb from a big tree extended across the trail.

His three fancy gunners were hanging in a row on that limb, their feet just above the ground.

Joe Peel uttered a terrible oath, spurred his horse around them, and galloped on towards Horcado. The O I C was evidently not crippled as much as he thought it was. He'd have to get the boys together and really hit them. At Horcado, Peel stole up to the room.

"Do you know what happened?" asked Antrell.

"I can guess," snapped Peel. "I met Idaho and them on the trail."

"Did they tell you——"

"No, they didn't tell me anything. They are hanging in a tree."

"No!"

"Yes, I tell you, and if you fellows don't do your work a little better from here on, old Obe Carter is going to make some more of you look like you were hung out to dry."

"Why, Joe," whined Antrell, "I did everything you told me to, just like you told me."

"Oh, I don't want to quarrel with you, Andy," said Peel, petulantly. "If we fall out, this deal is lost, and the north and south trail for long-loop stuff is closed for good."

"Looks to me like the deal is already lost," said Andy, glumly. "The O I C has gone to throwing rope. That's the only thing on earth that looks like a bogey to a rustler. Let 'em see a few of the boys gettin' ripe on trees, like you saw them three, and they'll rise and fly like blackbirds."

"I know, Andy, but listen. I made a bad mistake right at the start in handling this mess. If I had closed in on the O I C and hit hard and often, it would all have been over long ago. That's what we've got to do now, and do it quick."

There was the sound of tramping feet in the saloon, below stairs, and a voice roared at the day bartender, who had come on duty and was cleaning the place up as best he could: "Where's Joe Peel?"

"Come on," said Peel. "That's Steve Landers. He's riding mighty early. Must be something in the wind."

"Riding early, ain't you, Steve?" said Peel, when he and Antrell got downstairs. "Did Hep get rough when you told him you came to take his job?"

"No, he didn't get rough, he—Hep is gettin' ripe on the same tree with Arizona Pete and Clay Seltzer."

"What?"

"Just that," said Steve. "Old Obe Carter didn't even furnish the rope. Made 'em climb their own." Steve went on to tell where and how he had found Hep and his men.

"Ought to have had more sense than to have gone that close to the O I C, just three of 'em, and things like they are," said Peel.

"Yes," grinned Steve, "and closer than you are going to get any more of these long-loop riders to go, if they ever find it out. They all shy at a rope."

Peel told Steve, then, how he found his three pet killers, saying he would go back, cut the bodies down, and hide

them. Then he told Steve he must get the bodies of Hep and his two men out of sight. That it was no time to have their men demoralized by such unpleasant sights.

"Now, here's what we are going to do," said Peel, at last. "I'll go on back home. You two go to the Diamond D. I'll get word to Curtan, and to-night he'll send you enough men so that you'll have half of the gang. We are going to strike, and strike hard. When you get the word, cross on to the O I C range and ride like you are looking for cattle, but look for men. Don't let any get away. That's all. Let's ride now."

CHAPTER XVIII

The Attack on the Ranch

THAT morning, while Peel, Antrell, and Steve Landers were planning their final drive on the O I C, Obe Carter was again restless and dissatisfied. The day before, he had been thoroughly whipped. He and his six men had stayed at the ranch all day while the three mounted tramps were gone. But Obe Carter was the sort of a man who refuses to stay whipped long at a time.

The sun was shining now, grass was growing, and his cows needed attention. He had only ten men left, but that was enough to work some cattle. Nobody had ever told him that he couldn't work his own cattle. There were broken-legged cattle on the east side that should be shot and put out of their misery. Besides that, Obe wanted to know what the enemy was doing, and he wouldn't find out there at the O I C ranch.

The three mounted tramps had eaten breakfast in silence, along with the other men, and then had gone on to the pens. Obe Carter took Verne aside.

"Well, you fellows got back, I see. What did you find out about Joe Peel?" he asked.

"Nothing that we didn't already know," replied Verne.

"Did you go to Horcado?"

"Yes, sir."

Carter shot a curious glance at Verne and gave up the questioning. It was plain that Verne was not going to talk

about what he had done, if anything. So old Obe took a new tack.

"I think we gave them fellers all they wanted at Pot Hole prairie. I don't aim to stay hid-up here. We ought to be riding the range, and seeing that some little squad of 'em don't ride in and drive a mess of beef. We ain't goin' to jump no gang that ten can't handle. We didn't leave them many of the outfit. We got 'em trimmed to our size, now."

"We won't have ten," said Verne.

"How come we won't?"

"You agreed not to leave the ranch unguarded again until this trouble is over."

"Shore I did. The cook and the wrangler will be here."

"The wrangler will be busy, watching the horses. You don't want to set afoot, in the middle of a mess like this. Old Jose, the cook is a pegleg, and couldn't protect himself."

"See here, Verne, you have done some good work in this quarrel, but—I don't like the idea of your just takin' things over, and trying to run things."

"I am not trying to do that," said Verne, calmly. "All I ask is that you leave two men to guard the ranch, as you said you would. Do that, and my partners and I will ride you, anywhere you want to go. Otherwise, you and the others ride, and we'll stay here."

"All right," snapped Carter. "I like to see men cautious, but you are too damn' cautious. I reck'n eight of us can handle anything that comes up to-day. Red, you and Paint Charley are two of the oldest men I've got. I'll make you the home guard. Just stick around the ranch. There won't be anything for you to do."

The outfit rode east from the ranch in a bunch. They struck the East Fork valley and went up it. A number of crippled steers were found that had to be killed. Obe Carter cursed horribly at every shot.

Well above the trail that led to the Pot Hole country, they turned west and took the prairie divide back towards the ranch. Not one rider had they seen on all that long round. Obe Carter was elated. He was confident now that he had won the fight, after all, that the rustlers had had enough, and his range was again clear. Verne dropped a little behind the others as they neared the ranch, and paused to talk to Tommy on the porch.

Tommy had hopped away into the house on his sound leg. Verne was turning away, when the girl said in a low tone: "Wait a moment, Verne, please. I want to ask you something. Do you know why father left Red and Paint Charley at the ranch to-day?"

"Why—why, yes'm," stammered Verne. "He—At times like this, it—it's always a good idea to watch things pretty close."

"Yes, but—— Father says the danger is all over. Did—did you insist upon him leaping a guard here?"

"Why, yes'm, I—— You see it would be pretty bad at a time like this, to be set afoot, and—and—I thought the remuda ought to be watched pretty close."

"Oh, I see. It was to watch the remuda."

He looked at her, and felt his face go hot.

"Verne, you—you're not very good at hiding things—sometimes. I have not been afraid here, but thank you just the same. What have you all seen on the range to-day?"

"Nothing. Not even a fresh track."

"Then, you think as father does, that the trouble is over?"

"No, ma'am, I don't. I think the trouble is just started good. It won't be over until there is another cold showdown or two, and then maybe——"

"Maybe what? Do you think the O I C will win?"

"We've got to win," said Verne, nervously turning his hat in his hand. He didn't want to tell this girl the truth which was that he thought the O I C was going to be whipped to a finish before it was over.

"If—if father asks me whether I want a guard left here to-morrow, what must I tell him?"

"Why——I have no right to say, Miss Bessie, but——"

She heard him call her name for the first time, and it sounded like music to her as she stood with her blue eyes level on his brown ones, and said: "Yes, you have. Gregg has told me how much you and your friends have done in this fight. What shall I tell him?"

"Why—why the ranch won't be left without a guard," stammered Verne. "I—I must be going now." Turning, he strode away towards the gate and his horse, while Bessie openly and frankly watched him with admiration in her eyes. She knew that guard had not been left to watch the remuda.